SYNERGY

Volume 4: No.2

Exploring the Boundaries of Cinema and Entertainment



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Thinking Time !

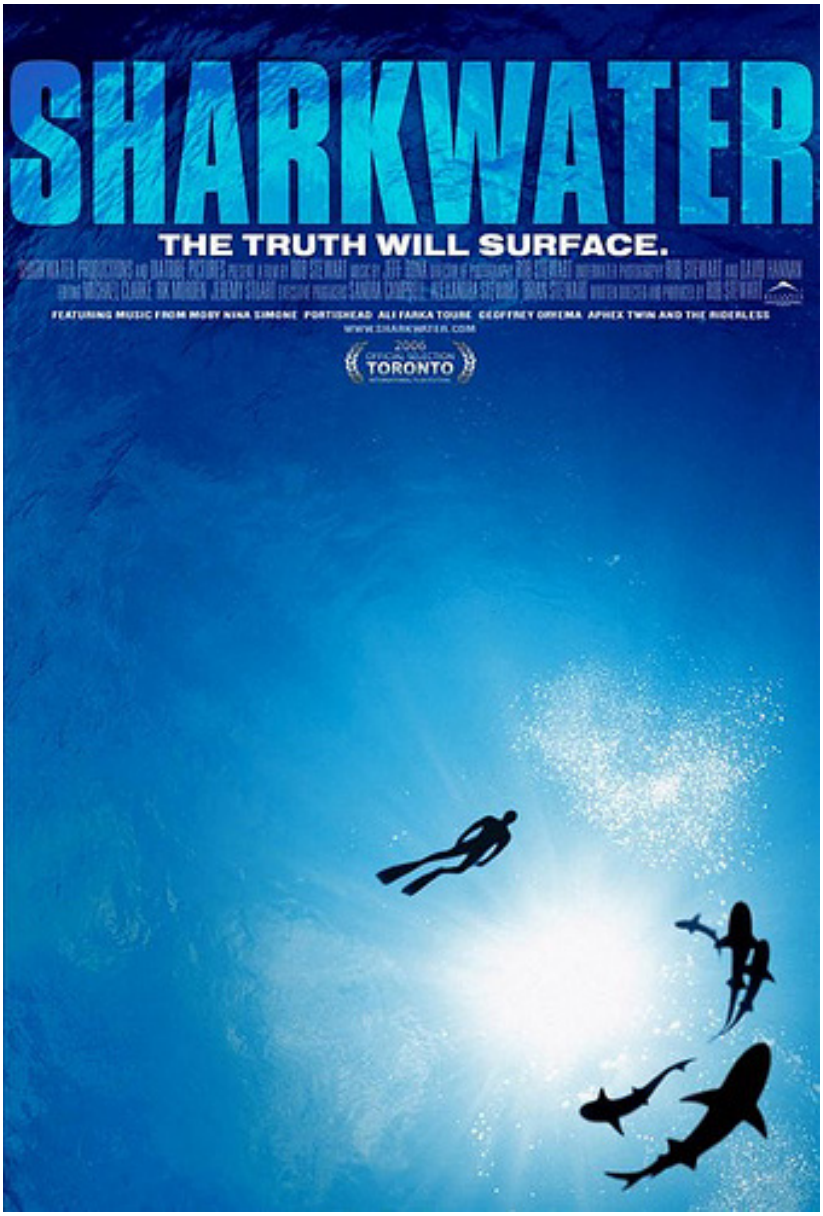
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SYNERGY

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Synergy Magazine reviews DVDs from all regions. The **R** description with each title advises the Region.

1 = USA
2 = UK
3 = Asia
4 = Australia
0 = All region.

DVD-R

DVD-R refers to titles which have not been formally released on DVD but release via specialty DVD firms. NTSC or PAL is used with the ALL REGION CODE and refers to the TV format.

Blu Ray

We review Blu Rays from all regions; we will clearly list the region (or region free) on each disc.

The best reference site for Blu Ray is http://www.blu-ray.com. It includes lots of details about Blu Ray releases and is one of the only reliable sources for information on which Blu Ray releases are ALL REGION.

If you require an ALL region DVD and Blu-ray player, we recommend you look at the Kogan Blu-ray player (http://www.kogan.com.au)

For Adult titles, we include an extra reference (E) for explicit, (M) for mature. Adult content within mainstream titles will be mentioned as appropriate.

DD refers to Digital Download with the format of the download following in brackets.

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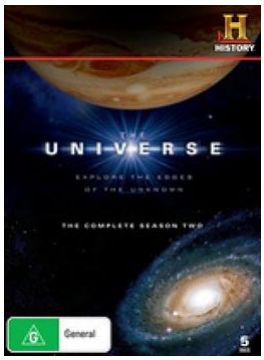
It is amazing how documentaries have grown to become a major segment in the market. When I was young they were badly made "talking head" productions which were shown on television and put you to asleep. With the advent of DVD documentaries were not the first products of choice to moved over to the new medium and so big budget films were the focus.

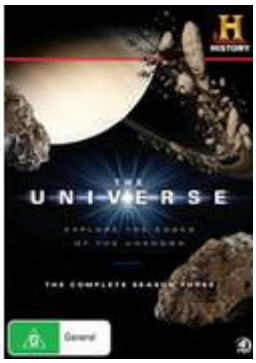
However as time progressed, and this may be the only positive side effect of climate change, documentaries on the environment began to make it onto the big screen. Many of these successfully competed with big release films and hence become a new and significant genre within the market. This was also helped with the reduction of the cost of special effects and CGI by the increase in computer technology.

Soon high quality documentaries filled the air from the television to the big screen and inevitably on DVD. Older series were cleaned up and released and the market for documentaries became huge and has continued to grow overnight.

While many of these documentaries have been made for the "lower common denominator" it has been edifying to see how many intellectually challenging series have also become available. *The Universe* from the History Channel is a prime example, three series so far with twelve episodes at 90 minutes each this is a massive offering. It covers all aspects of astronomy, quantum physics, space science and related subjects and offers challenging and thought provoking ideas in every episode. Documentaries have become a staple of Synergy magazine and we thought it was time we gave them their own special issue.

Editors
Synergy





The Universe Seasons 2 and 3

Produced by the History Channel this is a truly extensive series on the nature of space.

We once considered ourselves to be at the center of the universe now we know that we are just a small spec in a giant cosmos. This season, History ventures outsides of our solar system in another epic exploration of the universe and its mysteries. With strikingly realistic computer re-creations, you'll feel like you've travelled to the edge of the unknown: visit strange and unfamiliar worlds in Exoplanets, prepare for the worst in Cosmic Collisions, and uncover the secrets of our own galaxy, the Milky Way.

And that's just the beginning... learn exactly what Dark Matter is and how it takes up 95% of the universe; take a front-row seat for the ultimate light show with Supernovas; and while most people have heard of black holes (which swallow all matter that they come in contact with), find out more about White Holes which actually create matter.

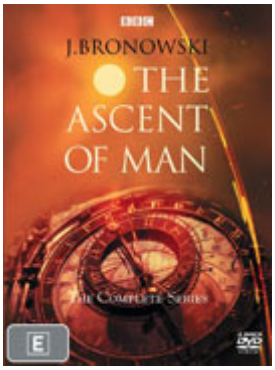
Thanks to Magna Home Entertainment, we have been lucky to receive 2 sets of DVDs and 2 sets of the Blu Ray editions to giveaway

If you want a chance to win send an email to promotions@synergy-magazine.com with The Universe in the subject line.

Please include your name and postal address in the body of the email with either DVD or Blu Ray.

This competition is open to Australian residents only.







Roadshow Giveaways

Roadshow has once again come up with the goods for a giveaway, this time for our Thinking Time special edition.

We have copies of *Battlefield Britain*, *Century of Flight* and *The Ascent of Man*.

Century of Flight (reviewed this issue) is considered the most comprehensive series on flight ever made covering 26 episodes on 7 DVDS.

The Ascent of Man while from the 1970s is a classic on the development of man. Battlefield *Britain* (also reviewed this issue) is a 3 DVD set with superb enactments and great CGI.

If you want a chance to win send an email to promotions@synergy-magazine.com with the title you would like to win in the subject line.

Please include your name and postal address in the body of the email.

This competition is open to Australian residents only.

Oscar Win for The Lost Thing



The results for the 83rd Academy Awards are in and Madman is proud to announce that Shaun Tan's *The Lost Thing* has taken out the gong for Best Short Film (Animated).

Directed by Shaun Tan and Andrew Ruhemann, and produced by Passion Pictures Australia, *The Lost Thing* is a painstakingly detailed 15-minute animation based on Tan's highly-acclaimed book of the same name. *The Lost Thing* also features narration by the Perrier award-winning Australian comedian, musician and performer Tim Minchin.

The Lost Thing was one of many nominations this year for films distributed by Madman. Other films nominated across a range of categories included Buitful, Animal Kingdom, Exit through the Gift Shop, Dog Tooth, The Illusionist, Outside the Law and National Geographic's Restrepo.

Palace Films' Oscar-nominated Gasland and Blue Valentine will be coming to DVD April and June respectively.



Ken Russell is still as wild as ever, he will play notorious British magician Aleister Crowley in a short film from Imperium Picture. Should be fun to see !

Iron Sky Gives Fans a Sneak Peek At The First Promo Trailer

Iron Sky, the Finnish-German-Australian sci-fi black comedy about Nazis from the Dark Side of the Moon, has released its promo trailer online. The trailer is still work-in-progress and it was released on the film project's Iron Sky Sneak Peek web service to give the fans a glimpse of what the live action in the film will look like, and to get comments and suggestions for finishing up the promo trailer.

"We opened Iron Sky Sneak Peek when we started shooting Iron Sky last November as both a service for fans and a crowd funding channel. A subscription costs a minimum of one euro, but those who want to support us can pay more", says Timo Vuorensola, the director of Iron Sky. "The basic idea of the service is to give the internet audience a chance to see how the first five minutes of Iron Sky are made, starting from the idea and going through script, animatics and so on. Eventually, the subscribers of Iron Sky Sneak Peek will get to see the first five minutes of the film before anybody else."

"So far we have been very reserved about showing something that's unfinished, but now we are expanding the service into an experimentation laboratory, where we will release other pieces of 'work in progress' material in addition to the trailer, and ask the audience for feedback", says the producer of Iron Sky, Tero Kaukomaa. "Iron Sky Sneak Peek has been a great way for us to get support from our fans and to give them a chance to influence how the movie will turn out."

The finished version of the promo trailer will be released at this year's Cannes International Film Festival.

Iron Sky Sneak Peek: http://www.ironsky.net/sneakpeek/2011/03/iron-sky-sneak-peek-testlab-1-the-first-promo-trailer/

Fact as Film and Film as Fact



What is a Documentary Film ?

It is actually quite difficult to define a documentary film. Technically it is a film that attempts to document reality. While in most documentaries original footage is used, interviews are significant (and not scripted) and actors are avoided it is not always so. In more recent years reconstructions have become more popular and hence this requires the use of actors and cinematic techniques. While this has increased the communicativeness of many documentaries it has also blurred the line between entertainment and the factual documentary. The best definition is that a documentary attempts to document a certain fact or number of facts and therefore has a clear and precise message or focus where general cinema does not. To try and differentiate between a documentary and “news” opens a further can of worms. Once again we would have to emphasize the reason behind the film, while a newsreel simply reports a given event; a documentary tries to document the event with a specific message to convey. While some see newsreels as a subset of the documentary I would suggest that the issue of “meaning” is what actually differentiates them.

The word documentary was first used in a review of the film *Moana* (1926) by John Grierson, a well-respected film reviewer at the New York Sun. This film documented the customs of Polynesian natives on a Samoan island and looked at their daily life. It also attempted to reconstruct



Polynesian culture before the coming of Western culture. Grierson defined a documentary as "creative treatment of actuality;” where the term actuality means “actual existence, typically as contrasted with what was intended, expected, or believed”.

Early documentaries were simply news with voice over narrations and interviews. Many were simply long, single shots of an event; these are sometimes called actuality films. As time went on these became more complex and vari-

ous events were edited together. Some of best examples of these are in the various propaganda films of National Socialism and Soviet Russia.

In the 1950's a unique form of documentary arose known as Cinema Verité. This was a form of documentary without narration letting the camera supposedly tell the truth. This form of cinema developed in Canada as Direct Cinema.

Documentaries have always been intertwined with both propaganda and exploitation films, from the earliest days of hygiene films such as "*Mom and Dad*" where a birth could be shown in a supposedly educational presentation to modern 9/11 conspiracy films.

Documentaries have become immensely popular over the last few years. This may be because of a public thirst for education associated with the increase in the quality of CGI reconstructions and the professionalism of new documentary product or the banality of Hollywood releases and a desire for something with a degree of intelligence, it is hard to tell. While documentaries are still less popular than many film genres major releases such as *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) have shown that documentaries can compete successfully with major releases in the marketplace.

Early Documentaries

The earliest documentaries were simply records of a single event most were incredibly short (some under a minute) and it is arguable whether these would be more classified as newsreels than as documentaries. Between 1898 and 1901 the Romanian professor Gheorghe Marinescu made several science films including *The walking troubles of organic hemiplegy* (1898), *The walking troubles of organic paraplegies* (1899), *A case of hysteric hemiplegy healed through hypnosis* (1899), *The walking troubles of progressive locomotion Ataxy* (1900) and Illnesses of the muscles (1901). These could be seen as very early examples of medical documentaries. The first Australian documentary is believed to be *The Inauguration of the Commonwealth* (1901). It was also the first Australian film to use multi-camera coverage and is also of major historical significance. A further early Australian documentary is Living *Hawthorn* (1906), the Reminiscences of Work-



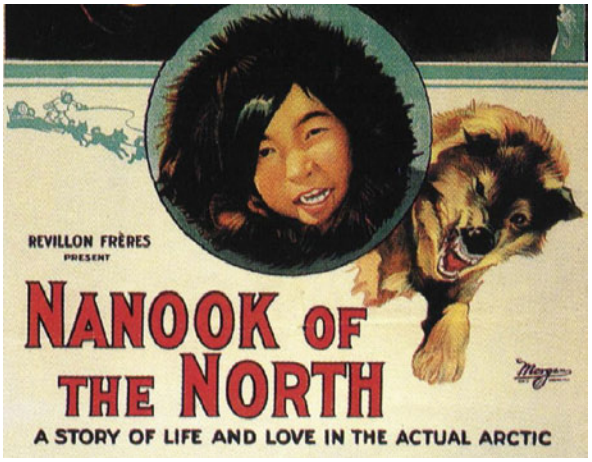
The Inauguration of the Commonwealth (1901).

ers Leaving the Lumiere Factory. The footage was filmed by Millard Johnson and William Gibson, two pioneers of Australian silent film.

1900-1920 Scenics

During this period we see the development of the travelogue or scenic. These were films showing adventures to exotic lands combined with supposedly honest reconstructions and reenactments. Some of the prime examples of these films were *Land of the Head Hunters* (1914) and *South* (1919) which covers the failed Antarctic expedition led by Ernest Shackleton in 1914. These were also popular in the Australian market.

Home of the Blizzard (1913) documents the treacherous 600-mile 1911–1914 expedition to the Magnetic South Pole lead by Sir Douglas Mawson. These films developed into what became the romance of the exotic where the strange rites of indigenous races could be enjoyed from the safety of your cinema seat. The



most representative of this form of cinema was *Nanook of the North* (1922).

Nanook of the North and the Cult of the Noble Savage



Robert J. Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) united documentary filmmaking with romanticism, specifically a focus on the celebration of the "Noble Savage". Often this was done with dubious interpretations of the past and a sanitising of the image. Anything that could offend the western viewer was removed while keeping at least some content to titillate and amuse.

In Nanook, for example, the Walrus shooting scene was reconstructed with a harpoon even though this was a method abandoned a hundred years before. Robert J. Flaherty was also involved in *Tabu: A Story of the South Seas (1931) which supposedly* reconstructed Samoan life. Other similar films include *Chang: A Drama of the Wilderness* (1927) on native life in Thailand and *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life* (1925) on the Bakhtiari people of Iran.

The mixture of romanticism and the scenic later gave rise to the Mondo film. As it became obvious that it was possible to show breasts and other "contraband" content under the guise of a documentary, exotic locations could be used to create educational films with controversial content. The earliest example of this sort of Mondo film was actually made in 1922.

Haxan or Witchcraft through the Ages (1922)

Haxan is an astounding film for its age. It was directed and produced by Danish filmmaker Benjamin Christensen and purports to tell the story of Witchcraft through the ages. It borders on the edge of exploitation using lurid reconstructions and set pieces which are really quite breathtaking. It includes stop motion sequences, orgies and Black Masses and even occasional nudity. There are great scenes including a dirty old randy priest chasing a nun around the room



trying to have his way with her!

The first section of Haxen is presented in a dry formal style with images and silent intertitles. It then moves to reconstructions with Christensen even playing the devil at times. It has a strange tone with Christensen obviously critiquing the excesses of the inquisition as well as the corrupt nature of the clergy. Criterion U.S.A. has released a superb edition which also includes a 1960's edition with a jazz soundtrack and voice over by none other than William Burroughs.

Science Comes of Age



In the Twenties the importance of science came to be reflected in documentaries. *The Sun Worshippers* (1922) is an Australian documentary which focused on scientific expedition to Wallal for the 1922 solar eclipse confirming the bending of light by gravity predicted in Einstein's 1915 General Theory of Relativity. *Wunder De Schopfung* (1925) released on DVD (1992) by Filmmuseum Munich (http://www.edition-filmmuseum.com) is a superb example of a science documentary from this period.

This early film by Hanns Walter Kornblum is one of the earliest attempts to popularise science by using filmmakers' techniques. It was a brave attempt at a time when few schools had any film projection equipment and the big cine-

mas had not considered documentaries as a serious prospect. Kornblum had experience in making commercials and advertising and so was probably better suited for this work than producers of conventional dramas. He also understood the process of model making and graphics to demonstrate a point.

Although it was a documentary the film was dressed up with a certain amount of science fiction such as spaceship shots to give it more appeal. As the Nazi organization moved more into filmmaking, it caused problems for Kornblum. Major Ernst Krieger, head of the Culture Department, appeared not to know what a planet was, but he had definite ideas on what the film should contain…. "*we have to get a couple of naked girls in here*".

Our Heavenly Bodies (the title in English) is a comprehensive examination of the solar system, planet by planet, and I was amazed at just how much of the science is the same as today. The early scientists were surprisingly well informed.. There is a really good history of the development of astronomy from the beginning of the church-supported Earth-centric concept, through to the astronomers who fought for and introduced the Sun-centric design that we accept today.

The film is a fascinating look at "antique science", which turns out to have been surprisingly accurate. Kornblum intended that the film should be shown as an illustrated lecture and the modern voiceover handles this very well. On this DVD is also a very early documentary (1923) on Einstein's Theory of Relativity.

Propaganda

Although the documentary has been with us for a long time, in the early days of film they were expensive to make. It is not surprising therefore that many early documentaries were produced with government funding to push a particular line of policy. It is this motive of presenting a viewpoint that differentiates a documentary from propaganda.

Propaganda has often been a product aimed at selling a war. One of the earliest and most successful was *Battleship Potemkin*, commissioned by Stalin in 1925 and produced by Sergei Eisenstein. It is a dramatised (and partly fictional) ac-

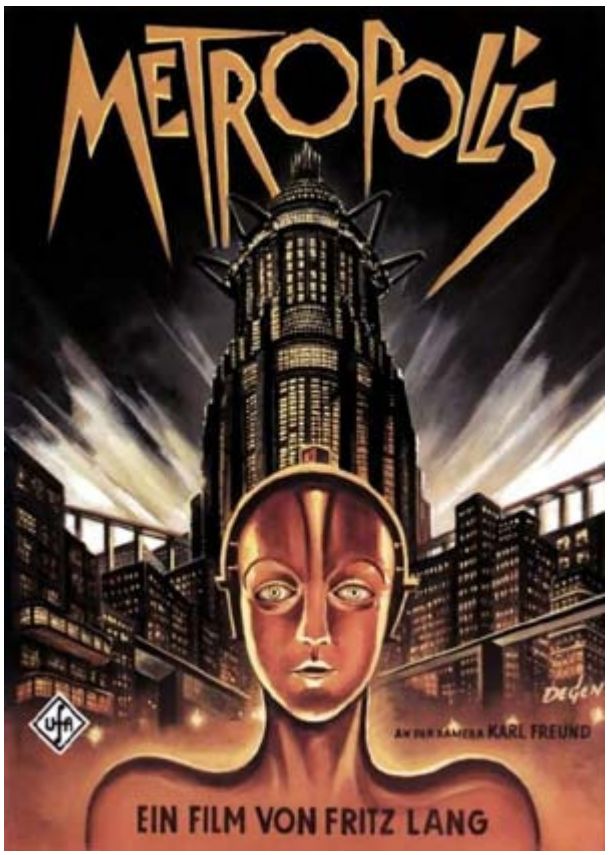


count of the mutiny on the Potemkin in 1905 that was symptomatic of the problems of a feudal country led by an arrogant aristocracy. It had all the elements that came to characterise propaganda films – a credible but subtly distorted storyline, a slant that reflected current government thinking rather than historical accuracy, a patriotic hero and enough drama to make it good entertainment. Hitler's Minister for Propaganda, Josef Goebbels, is quoted as saying that if he wasn't a committed Nazi then after watching Battleship Potemkin he would have become a Bolshevik.

Realising the power of film, the Russian government went on to explore other policy areas in film. In Synergy we have already had a look at Earth, for instance. This glorifies the Russian peasant and urges the benefits of collective farms over the old fragmented system. Such films were widely circulated in the vast farming areas to motivate the peasants (now called farm workers) and make them feel they were an important part of the new Russia. Earth also took a swipe at the old feudal landlord system and at religion.

Birth of a Nation (1915) was an example of the





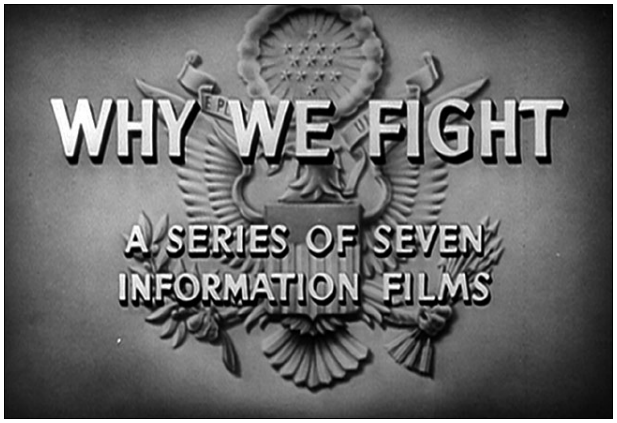
sinister use of propaganda to push a personal viewpoint. It purported to be a history of the early U.S. but was heavily slanted towards racist anti-negro propaganda. Although the first part of the film, up to the American Civil War, is fairly honest it is the last half that is disturbing. The Ku Klux Klan is depicted as a patriotic group saving southerners from the menace of the freed Negro slaves who are intent on rape and murder and therefore are a menace to white people. Even the "tame" negros are stereotyped as dull-witted and lazy and lacking any of the values of a civilised people. Director D W Griffith may have been unaware of his own racism but some of his twisted ideas and motifs were deliberately revived in later years by the anti-Semitic propaganda of Nazi Germany.

The value of propaganda was not unnoticed in other areas. Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) is a thinly veiled reference to the plight of the workers of these times. After the Russian revolution many governments in Europe were nervous that their workers may get similar ideas to the Russians. Metropolis was severely cut in many countries to remove any such inflammatory ideas. This is a tribute to their awareness of the power of the propaganda film.

Propaganda reached its peak during World War II. Goebbels' propaganda was usually less subtle, being mainly the speeches of Hitler at massive rallies, victorious German troops crossing the border of their latest conquest, and more sinister, anti-Jewish propaganda. Hitler was a brilliant orator and his rousing speeches were instrumental in letting the National Socialists introduce their policies. Filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl produced what is often cited as one of the greatest pieces of propaganda ever filmed, Triumph of the Will. It traced the Nazis' rise to power and culminated in the Nuremberg Rallies of 1934. Its powerful use of advanced cinematography techniques and rousing music were exceptional for its time. Such inspirational speeches and films may not necessarily be called propaganda but the anti-Semitic films most definitely were. *The Eternal Jew* (1940) is probably the best example of this style of film.

In the United States the value of propaganda was not overlooked either. In a country with a large number of cinemas and a reasonably affluent population to visit them film was an obvious choice to spread a message. Such series as Frank Capra's 7-part *Why We Fight* were aimed initially at the U.S. soldiers to explain the background to the war, then at the American public to motivate them to accept longer working hours, security restrictions and rationing. Capra, in a neat bit of reverse propaganda, made use of German footage in his own films. He carefully inserted German clips out of context or to illustrate a point. He had almost unlimited access to major film studios and producers, directors and writers. The animated maps that feature in some of the films were produced by Disney Studios. *Why We Fight* was hailed as a masterpiece of the documentary.

The word "propaganda" apparently wasn't men-



tioned. The series was also shown in Britain and possibly the Soviet Union.

Like Stalin, the U.S. also made use of the feature film as a propaganda tool. John Wayne for instance made many films extolling the heroism of the American fighting man, although he never enlisted himself. Many of these films were simply dreadful but there was no mistaking their purpose. Lowell Mellett, President Roosevelt's Co-ordinator of Government Films, admitted in 1945 that one of his main jobs was to convince Hollywood to "insert morale-building and citizenry arousing themes in its films by all means possible".

There were also other "informational" films showing the swastika taking over Europe, leaving only lonely Britain to resist the Nazis. Incidentally the term "Nazi" came into wide use to symbolise all Germans at this time, whether they were members of the Nazi party or not. This mistake is still widespread today. It served to identify all Germans with the evils of the Nazi regime and may have been a way of softening up the public to accept terror tactics like the firebombing of German cities that was to come.

Some of the feature films were actually fairly good. Memphis Belle showed the 40th mission of an American B17 bomber crew over Germany. It had a lot of live footage filmed during the mission by, once again, Frank Capra. It is now something of a classic and may still be available teamed with a British film of Lancaster night raids over Germany. The 2-pack was issued under the title of Bomber some decades ago. On a lighter note, towards the end of Memphis Belle the announcer gets pompous and his American accent gets stronger as he turns up the toughness factor. He talks of the US Army Air Force "bumming the ducks at Bremerhaven". No doubt the U.S. audiences and the Bremerhaven dock workers knew what he meant, though.

Post-World War II propaganda fell into a bit of a lull. With the threat of atomic war looming during the Cold War there were a number of feature films produced that could only be described as anti-war propaganda. Films like Fail Safe suggested that a nuclear war could start accidentally, as did the demented *Dr Strangelove, or How I Learned To Love The Bomb*. Government-sponsored propaganda was notably absent. This was more than made up for by the number



of mainstream films that featured espionage and counter-espionage. Even the British got into the act with their 1960s BBC TV series Danger Man. Government films were more along the lines of instructional films on how to make your own backyard fallout shelter – a subtle way of reminding you that your country was, really, at war.

Vietnam was a special case. With large amounts of the population hostile to the war some good PR was needed. Although the feature films of the time were left to the big film companies the government provided a lot of assistance to the "right" ones. So we saw the undignified spectacle of John Wayne being dusted off to willingly play a major role in *Green Berets (*1968). The propaganda value of such films was diluted however by the sheer efficiency of the TV news coverage of the war. Independent newsmen were free to film and broadcast anything they wished even if it did not agree with government policy. There is a particularly good documentary "*Vietnam – The Television War*" that highlights this without straying into either anti- or pro-war propaganda.



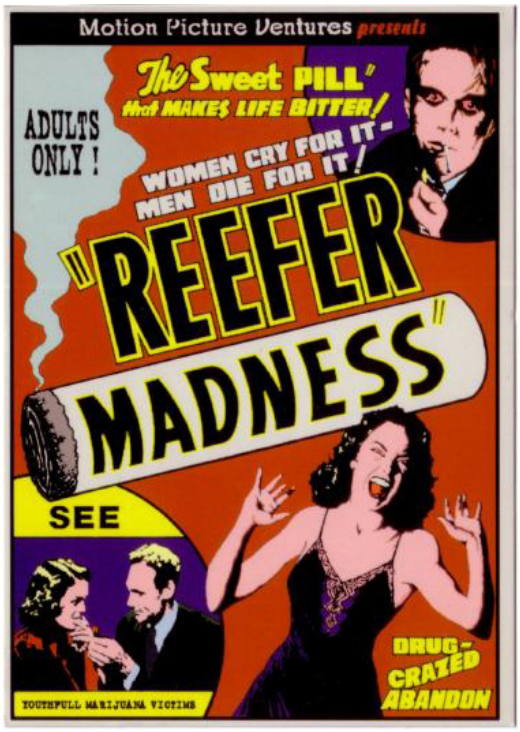
This led directly to the Gulf War practice of "embedding" TV news crews in military units on active service so they would receive the right impressions. It could put some TV news into the propaganda category, but it can also be seen as providing information from an angle that would not otherwise be available to the news broadcasters.

Over the last decade we have seen an increase in the number of private groups using the documentary format for their own propaganda. The two biggest users are the creationists, pushing a pseudoscientific model based on their religious beliefs, and the various environmental groups pushing a range of issues. They are closely followed by anti-U.S. government groups who tend to concentrate on the close military / industrial cooperation or the power of the big corporations. Incidentally a 2005 documentary reused the old Why We Fight name to push this approach. The cost of making a documentary has now dropped to the level that anyone can afford it and the sheer range of subjects available shows this. Many are beautifully filmed and compellingly argued but how do you know if a documentary is really subtle propaganda?

Many will quote unverified figures or will not attribute their source, They leave out opposing but valid arguments and carefully select their film clips to highlight their point of view. Check the supporting information given – some documentaries use examples that have already been discredited. There will often be a clear, simple message that you can repeat without having to think about it too much, such as "Evolution is just a theory" or "Exxon is poisoning natives in the Amazon". Two recent creationist documentaries we saw even had a prepared set of "conversation pieces" at the end, disguised as typical questions and answers that you could drop into conversations.

Sex, Drugs and Babies

The discussion of sex within documentaries began very early. *Damaged Goods* (1914) has a strident moral tone warning about keeping clean for family and nation. While the discussion of sex hygiene and nudity was on the list of no nos in the Hays Code of the 1930s filmmakers worked hard to get around them. It was during the 1930's and 40's that we see the development of "cautionary tales". These "shock" films



covered everything from sex hygiene to patriotism, drug use to homosexuality. *Reefer Madness* (1936) is the best known of the period explaining the terrible dangers of marijuana, even going as far as to suggest that it was more addictive and dangerous than heroin. Related films included *Marihuana* (1936) and *Assassin of Youth* (1937). *Narcotic* (1933) is in a similar vein but focused on opium addiction.

Sex Madness (1939) discussed venereal disease and premarital sex while *She Shoulda Said No* (1949) was an explosive expose of



both drug use and promiscuity. Films such as *Slaves in Bondage* (1937) and *Mad Youth* (1940) explored the dangers of prostitution and the exploitation of women. *White Child Bride* (1938) discusses older men marrying much younger girls especially in relation to the Ozarks where girls were being married off as young as ten years old.

Mom and Dad (1945) is a superb example of precision exploitation film marketing. Pregnancy and childbirth were exploited in a film which was publicized as a supposedly informative title. Directed by William Beaudine and produced by exploitation filmmaker Kroger Babb, Mom and Dad snuck behind censorship lines by presenting itself as being of "educational" value. They even sold sex-education books to add to the hype, making a fortune from the title Man and Boy and Woman and Girl which they created to go with the film. The film was condemned by the National Legion of Decency but still became one of the highest-grossing films of the 1940s.

While sex education films flourished in the Thirties, many of the films pushed the limits by showing brief shots of nudity. Early films such as *This Nude World* (1933) and The *Unashamed* (1938) used the nudist movement as a means to show nakedness, predominately female, within the context of supposed education. However, this trend really did not become significant until the 1950's when girls bouncing and playing nude on a beach became the trend. The best examples of nudist films from this period include *Garden of Eden* (1954), *Naked as Nature Intended* (1961), *Nudist Life* (1961), and the films of Doris Wishman such as *Beauties in the Sun* (1960). She produced seven nudist films between 1960 and 1964.

So what is the difference between a documentary and an exploitation film ? I think the answer is subtle and lies in the overt and covert messages of a film. A documentary usually has the same overt and covert message, even if it is a propaganda film. While an exploitation documentary purports to be educational but uses the overt message i.e. health, sexual hygiene, documenting the nudist movement to hide a more covert goal. This is certainly not a moral judgment, exploitation films are a superb part of the history of documentaries as are Mondo films, but it does help understand their place within the documentary genre.

Mondo Films

A "Mondo film" is a documentary depicting sensational topics, scenes, and situations. These tend to have a focus on "extreme" subjects such as sex and death, but not always. They use a mixture of footage including real and faked to create the sensational effect required. Mondo films essentially took the exotic trends of the earlier "scenic documentaries" to their ultimate conclusion. It was obvious that it was possible to document subjects forbidden in western cinema by placing them in the context of documentary filmmaking.

While there were various early exploitation faux documentaries such as Forbidden Adventures (1935), it is generally agreed that the genre began with the outrageous Italian film *Mondo Cane (A Dog's World)* (1962) by a journalist-turned-director Gualtiero Jacopetti and former naturalist Franco Prosperi. It covered all manner of subjects from sex to death, strange customs to animal cruelty. It shocked, stunned and amused audiences worldwide. The film struck a careful balance between humour and horror, alternating subjects for emotional impact and effect. Wealthy pet owners in Pasadena bury their beloved and pampered pets in yuppie graveyards while tribes people in Taipei braise puppies for a Sunday supper!

Mondo Cane was followed by *Mondo Cane 2* (1963), *Women of the World* (1963), *Africa Addio* (1966) and *Goodbye Uncle Tom* (1971). These films were all made to exploit the diversity of customs worldwide and shock Westerners who had little knowledge or experience of a world outside their own experience. A superb box set of all the titles is available from Blue Underground (R1).





Mondo films tended to coalesce into various sub genres. On one hand you have the general "Mondo" film which exploit the differences between cultures and are marked by sarcastic commentaries and a sense of black humour. *The Shocking Asia films* (1976/1985) could also be placed in this category. They were marked by the use of the "strangeness" of other cultures to shock their audiences.

On the other hand you have "sex" films such as *Mondo Topless* (1966) by Russ Meyer and *Sweden Heaven and Hell* (1968) which used the pseudo-documentary style to get as much sex on screen as possible under the guise of legitimate education !

The third category were the death Shockumentaries. While death was always exploited in early Mondo films, it was only one aspect of the overall story. However a new form of Mondo film developed focused purely on death.

The first major film in this category was *Faces of Death* (1978). Faces of Death was originally released into the Japanese market and slowly seeped into the West by black market video tape. Of course, this fed the desire for the film and it was an instant success.

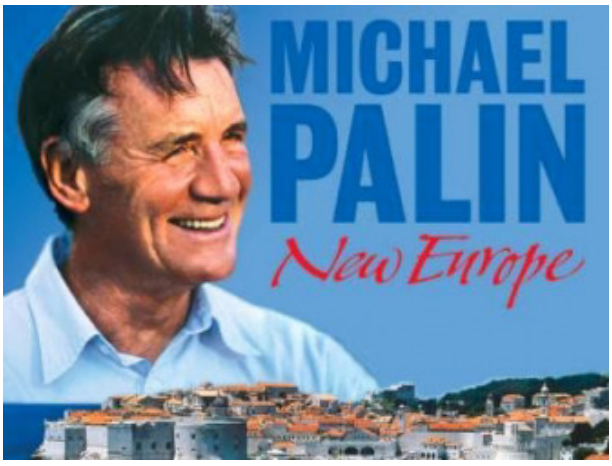
Faces of Death is a mixture of faked and real footage, it is estimated around 40-50% of the scenes have been faked (at a minimum). It has an "exploitation" look and feel. It opens with an introduction by Dr.Gross who comes across as a very unlikely clinician! Faces of Death is one of the most successful cult films of all times and was followed by a range of sequels. While certainly shocking, so much of it was so obviously faked that Faces of Death is more entertaining that offensive. Many films that followed lacked the ability to balance shock with humour, fake footage with real footage and these are much more difficult to stomach. Examples include the *Death Scenes Series* (1989 onwards) and *The Killing of America* (1982).

Direct Cinema or Cinema Verite

Cinema Verite was a movement developed by French filmmakers in the Sixties and continues today. It rejected the artificial forms that were developing with the documentary film market and emphasizes the simple direct method. These methods included simple photography and following an individual through an experience of life and allowing them to tell their story. The term literally means Truth Cinema and has had quite an effect on modern documentary filmmaking especially with the advent of handheld cameras. The idea was to avoid directing the documentary and allowing those involved to tell their own stories. Direct Cinema developed in Canada and was essentially the Canadian equivalent of Cinema Verite. *Gimme Shelter* (1970) is a classic example of the Direct Cinema approach. *Brother's Keeper* (1992) is another good example it was based on the alleged 1990 murder in the village of Munnsville, New York.

Travelogues

The travelogue has become a staple of documentary filmmaking today these have moved beyond both Mondo genre and the Noble Savage filmmaking of the past attempting to allow the countries visited to "speak" for themselves. Michael Palin is an exemplar of this form of documentary. In Michael Palin's *New Europe* (2007) he visited a wide variety of locations attempting to communicate the uniqueness of the





New European experience.

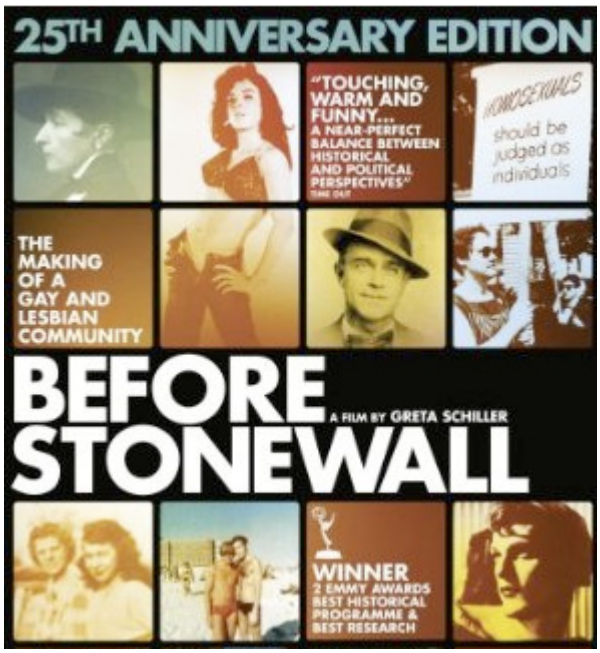
At times some of the more bizarre people gives the series a little of the Mondo feel but nothing compared to the Mondo films of the past. Other series by Palin such as *Full Circle* (1997) in which he undertakes his most ambitious journey to date, a 50,000 mile circling of the Pacific also is a prime example of the modern travelogue.

Other Travelogues such as *Sin Cities* (2005) have a more historical focus, using a series of cities to focus in how the changing way sex is seen. An English series of a similar name *Sin Cities: A Life Less Ordinary* (2000) travelled the world looking at the experience of sex in various cities. More often than not the modern travelogue attempts to use some sort of handle to an edge to the series. Series such as *Long Way Round* (2004) and *Long Way Down* (2007), for example, has Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman travelling great distances on their motor cycles.

Another interesting turn is the use of a purely visual style coupled with evocative music. The best known of this series were the Qatsi series directed by Godfrey Reggio and scored by Philip Glass, the word Qatsi meaning Life in Hopi. These evocative films *Koyaanisqatsi: Life out of* balance (1983), *Powaqqatsi: Life in transformation* (1988) and *Naqoyqatsi: Life as war* (2002) use all manner of visual effects and are produced in the highest possible definition. Each of these films worked to trigger an emotive rather an intellectual reaction. A further example of this type of documentary is found in *Baraka* (1992) by Ron Fricke.

Social Change Documentaries

While we have discussed documentaries from the perspective of propaganda, they have also proved of exceptional use in bringing about social change and educating the populace about a wide range of issues from HIV/AIDS to discrimination and sex education. While the early days of sex education films were marked by storks and animated images, with the advent of HIV/AIDS explicit documentaries helped bring the significance of safe sex to a larger audience. The sheer breadth of documentaries relating to social issues cannot easily be summarised. Many of these are unusual, idiosyncratic and eccentric and yet help communicate in a way that the written word could not. They can also reach out across large distances so that people isolated from information on sensitive subjects can learn without compromising their security. *Darling! The Pieter –Dirk Uys Story*, for example, from Umbrella Entertainment Australia, documents the life of a South African transvestite who fought the Apartheid regime to offer safe sex information while *The Naked Feminist* by filmmaker Louisa Achille explores the world of pro-pornography feminists and how eroticism can be a feminist issue. *A Jihad for Love* (First Run Features) explores the world of gay Orthodox Jews and how they survive within a very homophobic community, while *Passion and Power – The Technology of Orgasm* (First Run Features) offers a surprising history of the vibrator and the psychiatric diagnosis of hysteria. *Before Stonewall* (Peccadillo Films Eng-



land) covers the life of Gays and Lesbians before Stonewall when you could be arrested for homosexuality and forcibly locked in a mental institution for treatment while *I was a Teenage Feminist* (Trixie Films R1 DVD) reflects on the state of modern feminism.

When examining the history of documentaries it is important to realize their power for social change. In the Sixties documentaries and films on the Vietnam War, Feminism and Homosexuality helped influence the thoughts of a generation and even today documentaries from a less than mainstream perspective when well researched and presented in a way to avoid being polemical can have a significant effect on opinion.

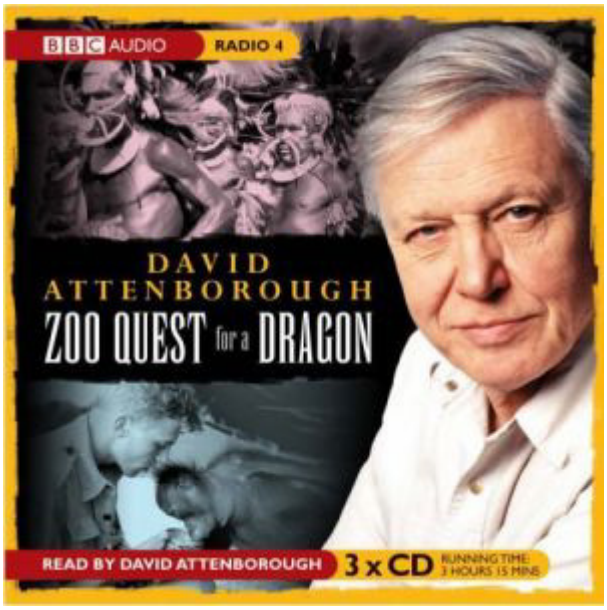
Environmental Documentaries

David Attenborough

The earliest environmental documentaries are not surprisingly attributed to the BBC and David Attenborough.

David Attenborough was born 8th May 1926 in London, England. He grew up in College House on the campus of University of Leicester, where his father was principal. Attenborough was educated at Wyggeston Grammar School for Boys in Leicester and then won a scholarship to Clare College, Cambridge in 1945, where he studied geology and zoology and obtained a degree in Natural Sciences. He spent two years in the Navy and then took a position editing children's science textbooks for a publishing company. He applied for a job in radio at the BBC but did not get the position; his qualifications did however attract the attention of Mary Adams, head of the factual broadcasting department of the BBC's developing television service. This was very



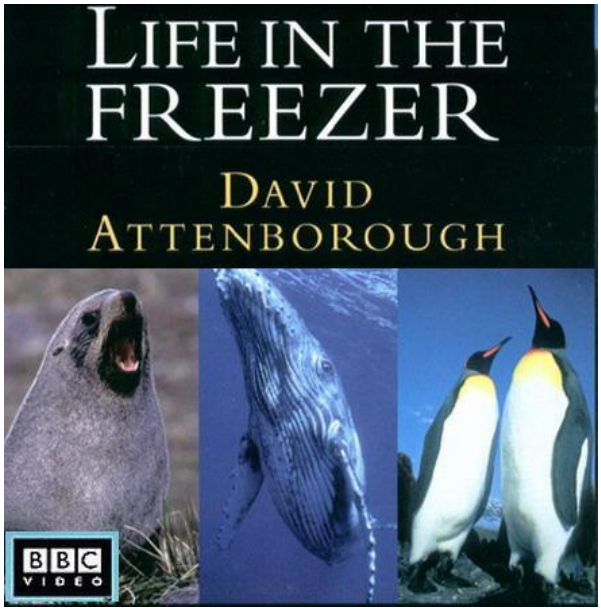


early days and most of the country did not own a television including Attenborough himself. However he accepted an offer of a job. After an initial training course he joined the BBC full time. His early projects included the quiz show *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?* and *Song Hunter*, a series about folk music presented by Alan Lomax.

Since his major love was animals he produced and presented a three-part series The Pattern of Animals. This programme featured animals from London Zoo with the naturalist Sir Julian Huxley discussing their use of camouflage, warning colouration and courtship displays. It was surprisingly successful. At the Zoo Attenborough meet Jack Lester and together they began to work on *Zoo Quest*.

Zoo Quest was first broadcast in 1954 and presented by Attenborough when the Jack Lester fell ill. Zoo Quest is a little dated by today's standards as it featured Attenborough travelling to an exotic location with a team who captures an animal for an English zoo! At the same time each episode explored the customs of the local people, looked at wildlife, plants and other significant aspects of the region and discussed the significance of the animal which was captured with experts when they returned from their journey.

Zoo Quest was so successful that Attenborough went on to form his own exploration and travel unit producing *The Travellers' Tales* and Adventure series. In 1969, he made a three-

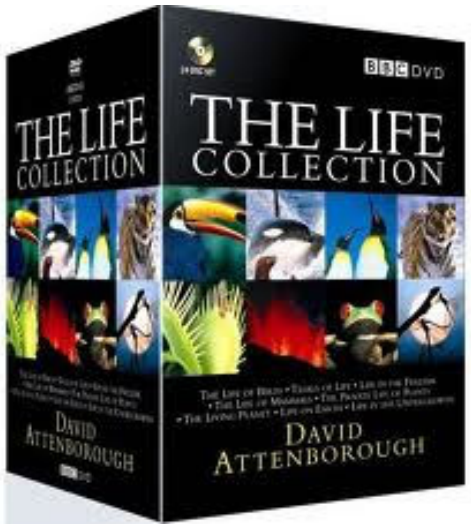


part series on the cultural history of Bali and for the 1971 film *A Blank on the Map* he travelled to New Guinea. Though he enjoyed working in administration at the BBC his heart was in nature documentary filmmaking so in the Seventies he resigned from the administration post he held at the BBC and returned to documentary filmmaking with Eastwards with Attenborough. He also began work on Life on Earth which made it to air in 1979. This was followed with *The Living Planet* (1984) and the highly successful *Trials of Life* (1990).

Life in the Freezer (1993) continued the exploration of life in various climates, while *The Private Life of Plants* (1995) was a show stopper. Against many naysayers at the BBC Attenborough was convinced plants could be just as exciting as animals and using time lapse photography and worldwide travel produced a truly amazing series. With each series Attenborough pushed the envelope in terms of world travel and sophisticated use of technology. In *The Private Life of Plants* he showed what really could be achieved with the right equipment and a lot of patience.

He decided to focus his next documentaries and next explored *The Life of Birds* (1998), *The Life of Mammals* (2002) and *Life in the Undergrowth* (2005) which explored the world of invertebrates. He followed up with *Life in Cold Blood* (2008) which focused on reptiles and amphibians.

Attenborough was also involved in *Planet Earth*



(2006) and more recently directed and produced *Life* (2009), a ten-part series focussing on animal behaviour. Every new series produced by Attenborough takes nature documentary making to a new level and his highly informed narration with high definition photography place the BBC at the pinnacle of environmental filmmaking.

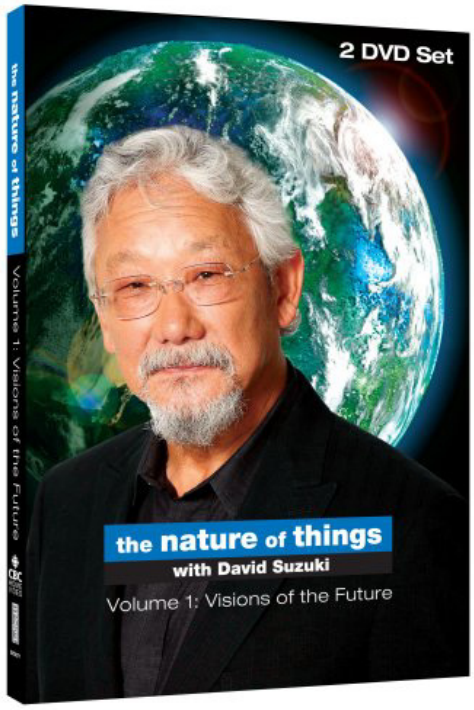
Attenborough has become more and more concerned about the environment and has recently examined population growth in *How Many People Can Live on Planet Earth?* (2009) and the pollution of the oceans The *Death of the Oceans* (2010). Attenborough has also produced a wide range of smaller series and programs and is currently at work on two new series.

First Life (2010) will tell the story of the origins of life by examining ancient fossils and modern descendants of primitive species. *Frozen Planet* (2011) will examine the impact of a warming climate on the polar regions

The American Story

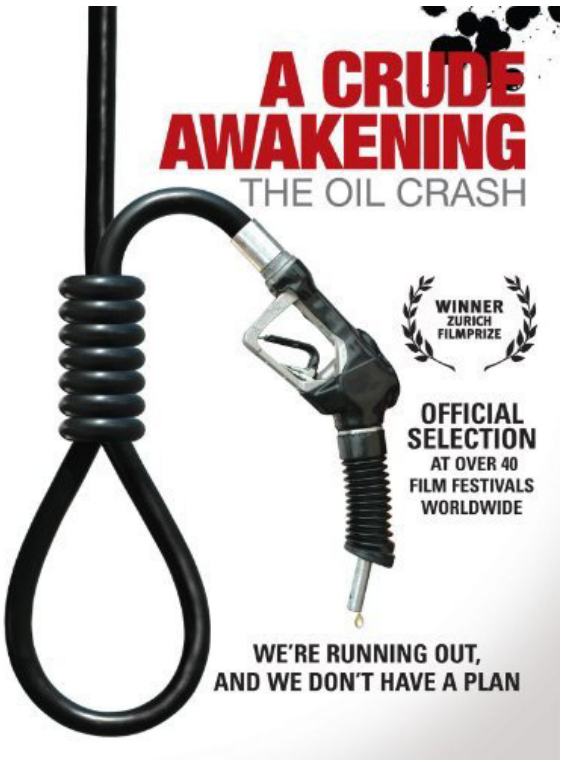
Walt Disney made various nature documentaries in 1960, some thirteen in all and these are considered some of the earliest environmental documentaries. ITV launched *Survival* in 1961 and it broadcast more than 800 episodes.

It was in 1962 that a major change in environmental documentary making took place. Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* which documented the disastrous effects of DDT and knowing disregard of the companies which produced it. This spurred many filmmakers into



action and it is from this book that much modern environmental activism began.

If You Love This Planet (1982) is significant if not for its presentation. It is one of the very first anti-nuclear documentaries and is a recording of a lecture by Dr.Helen Caldicott. While lots of nature documentaries were made in the U.S including many by National Geographic awareness of environmental issues seemed to be kept





out of the mainstream. During the early Nineties various films were made such as Scientists and the *Alaska Oil Spill* (1992), *Deadly Deception: General Electric, Nuclear Weapons and Our Environment* (1991) this did start to change as the decade wore on. David Suzuki became a regular campaigner with his eloquent TV series such as *The Nature of Things* (1998).

Of course Climate Change has now become the focus of lots of discussion (and sadly too little action) and so lots of environmental documentaries are on the market. *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) is one of the more mainstream and had major success even against entertainment releases, while many didn't take Al Gore seriously, his message is well presented and as time has gone on his comments have proved quite prophetic. *Crude Awakening: The Oil Crash* (2006) is a solid look at the oil crash which is on the way. *Who Killed the Electric Car?* (2006) is more unusual film exploring why the electric car was shelved and placing the blame directly at the feet of the petroleum companies. *The Great Warming* (2006) was another



good film on climate change. *Sharkwater* (2007) is an especially impressive film looking at a various specific environment issue, how we treat sharks. It examines the shark fin industry and how fear of sharks is decimating the many species of sharks we have around the globe. *The Cove* (2009) has a similar message focusing on the slaughter of dolphins for food primarily in Japan. Many of these more specific focused environmental documentaries seem to have more effect than the more generalized "green polemic". When you can see the specific effect of an action you are more likely to be moved to action that if you are given a more generalized message and left feeling powerless.

National Geographic

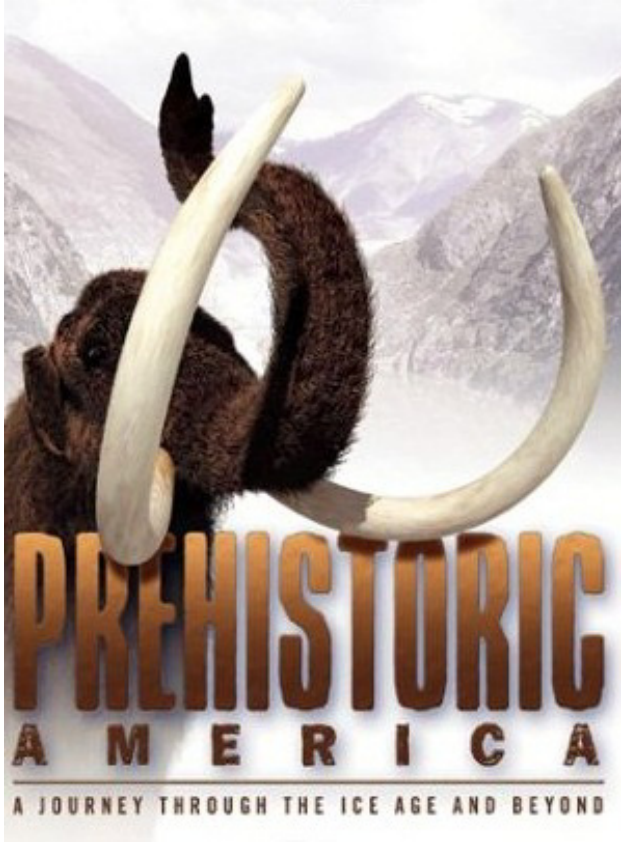
You cannot tell the story of the environment on film without discussing National Geographic. The National Geographic Society began in 1888 as a club for an elite group of academics and wealthy patrons interested in travel and nature. It continued this way until 1899 when Gilbert Hovey Grosvenor was named the first full-time editor of National Geographic Magazine and he devised the notion of marketing Society membership to the public. The magazine itself was first published in October 1888 as a side benefit for membership. It was soon opened up to the public. It has always included 12 issues per year and four map supplements, occasional it has special issues. Currently it is published in 32 languages.

National Geographic moved into television in 1964 with Geographic. The series started on CBS in 1964, moved to ABC in 1973 and shifted to PBS in 1975. National Geographic Channel launched in January 2001 as a joint venture of National Geographic Television & Film and Fox Broadcasting Company. Sub channels include Nat Geo Wild, Nat Geo Adventure, Nat Geo Junior, and Nat Geo Music. National Geographic has won 44 Emmy Awards, four Peabody Awards and two DuPont-Columbia Awards in Broadcast Journalism.

National Geographic is an unusual phenomenon, unlike the government funded BBC, it is driven by profit and a slow transformation of its programs can be noted from earlier periods when they were academic to focus where now they have become edutainment grist for the Cable TV mill. A further criticism has been made by Reading National Geographic, Lutz and Collin that the program tends to be so "American" focused that it has a strong bias against "both old Europe and primitive non-Western regions... an identity of civic and technological superiority but yet, a distinctly benign and friendly identity". I would certainly argue that many of the National Geographic programs do seem to put the science second to American social issues. For example, when discussing Evolution, the BBC is strident in its scientific approach, while Na-







tional Geographic seems to waver giving time to creationists and supposed "alternative viewpoints". At the same time National Geographic cannot be overlooked since it has produced an immense library of documentaries covering all aspects of the environment.

Modern Science Documentaries and the Change of Technology

An interesting discussion is the effect of technology on documentary filmmaking. In the earliest documentaries the limitation of film was the major issue and hence the first documentaries were only a few minutes long. As time progressed the length of documentaries increased but the limits of black and white filmmaking was obvious. It was with colour that documentaries really grabbed the public imagination. Television had a major effect on the documentary; the documentary film did not only have to be shown at a cinema but could be made for television. The first publicity released for television hailed it as a medium for education and the earliest programs were of an educational basis. The BBC particularly took their educational task seriously and have continued to be unrivalled by any other company worldwide not only for their technological expertise but their ability to communicate. David Attenborough has nearly singlehandedly been responsible for this. He is able to communicate complex subjects without talking down to his audience or reducing the subject to mass market appeal. So often this is something which marks the difference between BBC documentaries and those produced for Cable TV in the US.

The BBC works to educate and inform and doesn't water down its message, while Cable TV environmental documentaries too often seemed to wish to communicate to the "lowest common denominator" and hence come across as brash and simplistic. A classic example is found within the revival of Dinosaur documentaries. With the increase of new CGI technology it became possible to create realistic programs based on prehistoric life. *Walking with Dinosaurs* (1999) was a six-part documentary series produced by the BBC, narrated by Kenneth Branagh. It was a huge success and followed by various related series: *Walking with Beasts* (2001) and *Walking with Monsters* (2005).

Specials were created by the BBC to work with the series *The Ballad of Big Al* (2000), P*rehistoric America* (2002), *Chased by Dinosaurs* (2002), *Walking With Cavemen* (2003), *Sea Monsters* (2003) and *Prehistoric Park* (2006).

It is interesting to compare *Prehistoric America* (2002) with the newer *Prehistoric* (2009) made by the Discovery Channel. The BBC program has a strong academic focus with good narration, the Discovery Channel constantly overemphasizes the US cities in which the events take place and has a strong brash and annoying voiceover. At one stage the narrator even calls a dinosaur "The Terminator", it is sad because the show has a lot of good content but is let down by the need to make the series relevant to the "cool" viewer.

While *Prehistoric* has many elements from *Prehistoric America* (2002) it reduces the effectiveness of the show by overusing CGI (just how many times do you need to see city landscapes melting into the past) and with questionable narration. While the academics interviewed have a lot of good things to say the format of the show literally negates their message, to be honest I was expecting a dinosaur rap song to end the series !



Primeval has proven to be one of the most successful science-fiction series on the market. It brought together fairly accurate depictions of dinosaurs and extinct animals with astounding CGI, a great plot and solid acting. On the cusp of 2011, two new seasons of Primeval are under production and hence we thought it would be interesting to reflect on the back catalogue of Impossible Pictures.

Walking with Dinosaurs (1999)
The Ballad of Big Al (2001)
Walking with Beasts (2001)
Walking with Monsters (2005)

Narrated by famed Shakespearean actor Kenneth Branagh the Walking With series and special episode Big Al the Allosaurus were quite literally groundbreaking, pioneering and innovative in their use of CGI in a scientifically informed made for television documentary series as before this time such expensive special effects were only ever seen on the big screen.

In this wonderful series of documentaries dinosaurs and extinct animals were presented in a truly engaging way that was as close to lifelike as possible with the cooperation and help of a wide variety of scientific advisors, and together with the production team they pioneered the big budget 'edutainment' documentary in a way that only the BBC could. These long dead creatures were given a new lease of life like never before in such a breathtaking, astonishing and visceral manner that one could almost reach out and touch them as if they actually were living, breathing and walking animals. In my opinion this documentary series has stood the test of time and holds up extremely well even now, and in short is still brilliantly crafted edutainment. In the U.S. versions of Walking With the voice of Kenneth Branagh was replaced with that of acclaimed theatre actor and much loved star of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, Avery Brooks.

Walking with Cavemen (2003)

Narrated by Robert Winston this documentary series doesn't feel the same as the previous entries, and many fans don't really consider it as a true part of the Walking With franchise. If you will it isn't seen as canon, and I must admit I do tend to agree on that point as it is only loosely connected with the other Walking With series though it is still a fascinating story.

Chased by Dinosaurs (2002)
Chased by Sea Monsters (2003)

Zoologist, adventurer and television presenter Nigel Marven features in these two 'mockumentary' series in which he travels back in time to various epochs to meet the infamous locals and explore their habitats. They get a bit silly at times and although affable Nigel Marven can get quite annoying after a while, they are still fun and well made nonetheless. I think the main problem was that by this stage the team behind the franchise and its various spinoffs





were getting too carried away with the whole concept; and as a result lost much of that sense of infectious mystery, wonder and awe the previous series had.

As with Prehistoric Park the major problem was that the filmmakers seemed to have no clear understanding of what they were creating; are they educational programs, merely entertainment or something inbetween? However it is interesting to note that this series gave rise to an idea which later was more fully explored in Primeval, namely the concept of time travel.

Prehistoric Park (2006)

Nigel Marven returns in this six part series in which he creates a wildlife park for extinct animals of all varieties, shapes and sizes. The time travel plot device seen in the two Chased By series is explored in further detail, though it is never adequately explained how it works. The awkward mix of fumbled attempts at humour, ham acting and facts based information also make this series a rather uneven experience and while I did find it enjoyable, ultimately it was something of a letdown.

But even more worryingly I must admit I find the whole premise of this series a bit ethically questionable; for instance how can one justify bringing back formidable apex predators such as Tyrannosaurus Rex, Sabre Toothed Cats or a herd of gigantic herbivores like Titanosaurus when the ecosystems in our own time are under unparalleled stress and many species are being pushed to the absolute edge of their limit by human activity? The whole concept is extremely troubling and would wreak such environmental havoc, that it really doesn’t bear thinking about! Furthermore many of the species featured went extinct as a result of natural means or because of environmental disasters that humans had no hand in, such as a stray comet impacting the earth or an increased era of volcanism. Another aspect that stretches credibility is the fact that not enough specimens could be ‘rescued’ from the past to create a viable breeding population, unless this was done via artificial insemination or genetic engineering. Furthermore many species had evolved to suit a certain type of climate or ecological niche which is no longer in existence; such as Mammoths and the Sabre Toothed Cats that preyed upon them in the Ice Age, and thus from an animal welfare perspective it would be cruel to bring them forward to a time where the climate is significantly warmer. To sum up I think for this series the wise adage “let sleeping dragons lie” is most appropriate.





Monsters we Met (2004)

Hmm, what on earth can I say about this series! Well first off although it did have an interesting line of reasoning and was extremely well done the bleak picture that it painted of the history of humans exploring new ecosystems and encountering strange new animals was totally unexpected and left of field; in fact it left me quite floored, shocked and dumbfounded! I don't mind a documentary putting forth an argument that is highly polemical, controversial and challenging but I at least would prefer some prior warning beforehand of what to expect... of which in this case there was none. It isn't that I disagree with the conclusion that throughout our history we humans have had a terribly destructive effect on every natural environment that we have encountered, but somehow I think this kind of polemical documentary making would turn many people right off. Monsters We Met is unlike any of the other series in the franchise and will come as something of an unexpected shock to anyone who is not prepared for what to expect, even if it is historically accurate.

Due to the idiosyncrasy of the U.S. market the American release of *Monsters We Met* was reedited to become *Land of Lost Monsters* and was a strange transformation indeed with various sections completely edited out, segments moved from one end to another and the strong environmental message being watered down so as not to cause any offense.

Primeval (2007-2009 and 2011)

All of this unrivalled experience, knowledge and skill gained in bringing extinct animals back to life for over twelve years has culminated in the latest and perhaps most successful manifestation of the franchise since the *Walking With* series first aired, Primeval. Unlike most of the other entries which seemed unsure if they were more fact or more fiction Primeval has its feet firmly planted on the ground and is truly refreshing in its sheer originality, excitement and sense of fun.



Made for only three seasons there was such an outcry from fans when it was cancelled that Impossible Pictures and ITV made a deal with BBC Worldwide and German channel Pro7 to make two more seasons, to be aired sometime in 2011.

Primeval has all the elements that go into making a smash hit series; good character development, scriptwriting and a frenetic pace that keeps you on the edge of your seat throughout each episode. *Primeval* has captured the imagination of the viewing public and reenergised the franchise in such a way that there is even rumour of a major motion picture in the works, possibly to be coproduced with Warner Bros. This is indeed a high note to end on for a franchise that has been immensely enjoyable if a little uneven, and I look forward to seeing where it will go next.







War has always been a popular if controversial subject for documentary makers, both from an educational and entertainment point of view. Some have done it well, some have failed badly. If the main purpose of a documentary is to impart information in an entertaining way then there is little place for editorialising. We leave that to the historians. If a documentary tries to influence your opinion rather than impart facts, it is propaganda no matter how worthy the cause.

It can be hard to give facts without running into emotive issues. This is especially so in sensitive areas like the extermination of Jews, Slavs, homosexuals, clergy, gypsies, communists and others in Nazi Germany's concentration camps. A phrase like "Jews were herded into cattle wagons and taken by rail to the death camps" is emotive. Factually correct, but words like "herded" and "death camps" have emotional connotations. In this example, though, it is hard to convey the message in other words. When a documentary maker now talks about the "Holocaust" emotions are aroused. Constant use of the word in the context of the concentration camps has given it a certain meaning. Strictly it means the total consumption of an item (such as a sacrifice) usually by fire. In the case of World War II the Holocaust included all the races and ethnic groups already mentioned and could even be accurately used to include the refugees and dead from the firebombing of German cities, but the continued use of the word in a particular context means it is now used to refer to the mass extermination of European Jews. Jewry does not own the word "holocaust" but constant propaganda has given it a pro-Jewish meaning in most peoples minds. The nearest alternate meaning is its use in "nuclear holocaust". Such conditioned meanings and emotive words should be avoided where possible if a documentary is to impartially present the facts.

Because TV and DVD are such visual media the documentary will include a lot of varied film footage. These should be explained carefully or the clips are simply meaningless filler. Properly explained, a picture can indeed be worth a thousand words. In one documentary I saw the same scene of an advancing American tank three times to represent the savage fighting on three different Pacific islands. There is no excuse for such sloppy editing in a documentary on a subject as important as war.

Re-enactments are a difficult area in a documentary. Although useful to illustrate a point they must be done with tremendous attention to accuracy or they may fail to deliver their information. There will be a nit-picker out there somewhere who WILL know the subject better than the re-enactment producer. Re-enactments should therefore be used with care and treated with caution. In spite of a semi-documentary approach based mostly on re-enactments of known scenes a film such as The Longest Day is really a drama.

Interviews with the people who took part in a war are also difficult. Although some eyewitnesses can give reliable and presumably accurate descriptions in their old age, fading memory and the mind's tendency to forget the worst bits can affect their words. That is one of the values of documentaries like The World At War, though. The memories, even with their possible inaccuracies, are valuable but eventually the interviewee will die. It is vital to preserve those memories while they are still available.

Interpretations of the reasons behind an action should probably only be given by academics who can handle the facts impartially and investigate them more thoroughly. Looking back at the evidence and forming an interpretation is a skill that historians are trained for. For people who cannot retain an impartial academic approach to the documentary, their words are only opinions and should be stated as such. If the opinion is offered by an expert in the area their interpretations still carry weight. As an example there are two current areas of controversy developing over World War II. Was Hitler's planned attack on Britain only a ruse while he prepared to invade Russia? Did the Americans use atomic bombs on Japan to shorten the war or were they intended as a warning to an increasingly powerful Russia? Most documentary makers will wisely leave such questions alone and let the academics sort them out as more information becomes available.

In the next few reviews I have tried to examine what IN MY OPINION are good examples of war documentaries, covering many of the major conflicts fairly but in sufficient detail. I have looked for documentaries that firstly explain and illustrate their subject. Some give a brief history of a theatre of conflict and can be expanded with further effort by the viewer if it interests them. Secondly, any interviews or opinions expressed should be relevant and accurate. Thirdly, of course, they should be good viewing. It is no use making the world's best war documentary if your audience goes to sleep watching it.



Crusade In The Pacific
Madacy Film Entertainment Group

This 5-DVD set is a little unusual. Although it is American-made it acknowledges that other countries also took part in the war. MacArthur's



island-hopping advance on Japan is covered adequately but not exhaustively, The space thus saved is used to look at other areas of the Pacific conflict that are less known but were just as important to the campaign. These include New Guinea where the Japanese advance was first stopped, the Aleutian Islands from which the Japanese could have mounted airborne attacks on mainland U.S. and Canada, the jungle war in India and Burma and the air bases in China,

This is an unusual and comprehensive approach for a U.S documentary. Most concentrate on the Naval and air power that the U.S. could project, and the costly but highly photogenic island campaigns. The makers of the documentary were fortunate. It seems that every combat group must have had more cinecameramen than medics and their work is a thorough record of the various campaigns. Some of the footage comes from the patriotic motivational films made to exhort the American worker to do their best for the war effort. Some seem to come from the Why Do We Fight? Series and others from the occasional special propaganda films like Report From The Aleutians. Normally I



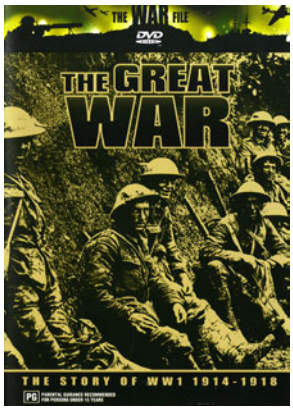
would rate this as a weakness, but in the context of this documentary it is valuable in giving us an idea of how the war was presented "back home".

The quality, as you would expect, is patchy. The lack of careful framing of shots, the awkward camera angles – all serve to give the combat footage an immediacy that would make a re-enactment look like a fake.

There are a number of interesting political touches in the documentary. I always regarded MacArthur as a bit of a show pony, like Britain's Bernard Montgomery. This documentary gives no opinions, but having seen him in action in the film clips I feel MacArthur may have been valuable to the war effort as a sort of hero like Churchill was to the British. He certainly showed his ability as an administrator when placed in charge of the conquered Japan.

As with The World At War the films leaves many areas underdeveloped. The viewer can fill n the gaps with extra research, but meanwhile the basics are here.

The Great War
From The War File range
Rajon Vision / Eagle Vision



This DVD is from the War File set, a range of inexpensive DVDs on particular areas of various wars. The release of a lot of new World War 1 footage gave the opportunity to make a feature-length film using original footage. There are no re-enactments to pad out the film, nor "colorization" to tart up original footage. The film clips are of varying quality, as you would expect from their age. It would have been good to see them digitally cleaned up. Quite often the sound is indifferent, becoming muffled and entangled with the rest of the sound track.

Despite these weaknesses it is an excellent potted history of World War I. It does not concentrate overly on the network of alliances and treaties that involved all of Europe following the assassination of Franz Josef in Sarajevo, but shows the political situation of each of the combatants. It gives particular emphasis to the role and trials of the civilians and the changes to the social structure necessitated by the removal from the workforce of so many men. In Britain it was necessary to try to recall steelworkers and miners, but many soldiers were reluctant to return – they now had regular pay and decent food. Trench warfare had not yet bogged down in the horrors of the mud to make them think differently. God, of course, was hypocritically invoked by both sides and would no doubt smite the enemy mightily. .



The worldwide spread of the war is covered, as are the difficulties and tactics of keeping the supply lines open. There were war profiteers on both sides of the Atlantic. The inability of the General Staff to cope with mechanised war is discussed. The days of the glorious cavalry charge were over but the generals did not have much of an alternative strategy.

Three areas of technology affected the War strongly and are well covered in this documen-

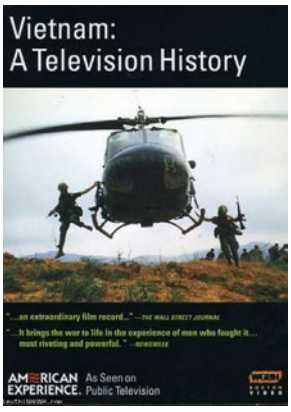


tary. Although the British surface fleet controlled the oceans, under the water the U-boats were devastatingly effective against convoys – a lesson not learned by the British General Staff until well into World War II. Aircraft technology advanced dramatically to the point that specialised aircraft by the end of the War had the capacity for long-distance bombing. The third innovation was the tank. Once again the generals didn't know what to do with it. Should it be a spearhead for the troops to follow? Should it go "over the top" with the troops in a supporting role? Should it be used for skirmishing with the enemy, autonomous and without defined objectives, as the cavalry used to be?

Major changes in the political situation are described in sufficient detail. The Russian Revolution, the transfer of command of all Allied forces in Europe to the French Marshal Foch, and the Communist-inspired unrest in Germany all played their part. In Germany the people were facing starvation and the troops at the front were needed at home to control the growing internal unrest. The potential internal revolution is a greatly unappreciated reason for the end of the War.

The film is well-researched and the information carefully selected for further amplification where needed. The film clips are mostly newly released. Of the histories available this both inexpensive and comprehensive.

Vietnam:
A Television History
American Experience, WGBH Boston
1983



The Vietnam War, far from being a small anti-Communist brushfire war, became one of the United States' greatest military debacles. It was promoted to the U.S. people as support for South Vietnam against Communist aggression from the North but the truth was somewhat different. The war went largely unnoticed by the U.S. citizens at first so they missed the quiet beginnings of the conflict. They were rarely aware that the war was a result of the U.S. meddling in the politics of a country that had



been ruled by foreigners for over two thousand years. The people now simply wanted their freedom. This long (over eleven hours of content) documentary was made after extensive research. The producers interviewed dozens of people from politicians and soldiers (from North Vietnam, South Vietnam and the United States) to nurses to get a full and impartial picture of the conflict. The result was a documentary that is still the most comprehensive and authoritative on the subject. Since most of the people involved are now deceased it is unlikely that a similar documentary can ever be made.

The Vietnam War was different from all others so far in that Government propaganda was, for the first time, countered by news footage taken by cameramen on the spot. Every night on TV screens in the U.S. the cold reality of a modern war was being shown and no amount of "a Government spokesman said ..." could replace footage that came directly from the battlefield. This footage was instrumental in combating Government propaganda, and came to the point that people finally started to look at the war and wonder if the U.S. should have become involved. This reaction did not only occur in the United States. Many other countries had sent troops at the request of the U.S. and the





antiwar feeling grew just as strongly in these countries. Here in Australia I was a teenager due for conscription at the time, but after seeing the TV news regularly showing burning villages, fleeing civilians and self immolating monks, after hearing of the My Lai atrocity, and after seeing the casualty lists published in the daily newspapers I started to wonder if Australia should be there. The North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were struggling to take back control of THEIR country and the early chapters of the documentary explain this history very well.

TV was informing people of what was really going on. There was the usual propaganda footage of soldiers struggling through jungle but TV was now showing the bigger picture using its own news resources. The images it showed were powerful and more realistic and honest. The result was huge demonstrations against the war. The people, now better-informed, were having their say and the blitz of Government propaganda was being neutralised by the facts.

The interviews are particularly interesting. While a young nurse talks of the disappearance of her father, a minor government official in Saigon, we have Secretary of Defence Clark Clifford discussing the importance of the speech to be delivered by President Johnson announcing that he would not stand for President again. Clifford appeared to be completely out of touch with the war. Stripped of its political rhetoric the North Vietnamese military officers show a good understanding of the fight they faced. Ex President of South Vietnam Nguyen Van Thieu discusses openly the corruption that plagued his country while it existed.

We (the TV viewers) knew the U.S. had finally caved in when it was first announced that they intended to hand the war back to the South Vietnam army in a process they called "Vietnamization" or "withdrawal with honour". Since most viewers were aware of the stalemate in Korea, the general feeling was that the U.S. had simply lost its will to win, a process now being duplicated in Afghanistan. The exit from Vietnam was one of the most shameful events in U.S. history as they fled from the country with little thought to what would become of their allies. The Vietnamese, especially the soldiers, had no command structure and the Army quickly broke down as people fled from the advancing North Vietnamese. It was all fully filmed for the TV news. That the North Vietnamese would take over was accepted and resistance collapsed.

The huge loss of life on both sides and particularly among the civilian population is highlighted. The cost of the war to the U.S. is spelled out. The loss to U.S. prestige cannot be measured. The documentary makes no major judgments about these. What is shown in the films makes its own point. If the purpose of a documentary is to inform, this is a very good example. The DVD set is still in print. With the current situation in Iraq and Afghanistan, perhaps it is time to air it again – just as a reminder.

The World At War
Thames Television, Britain



This monumental 26-episode series is still the defining war documentary despite now being nearly forty years old. It is still available and has now been converted to Bluray. It cost 900,000 pounds to make at the time. Producer Jeremy Isaacs saw a brief window of time remaining before most of the protagonists died or became senile. In the early 70s this day was fast approaching.

It is a comprehensive coverage of the entire war, not just the European or Pacific theatres. Even many minor theatres like Burma and Borneo are covered. Live film footage is used, not re-enactments. Much of the footage comes from newsreels of the time, on both sides. These clips could be seen as propaganda, which they were, but in the context of this series it is

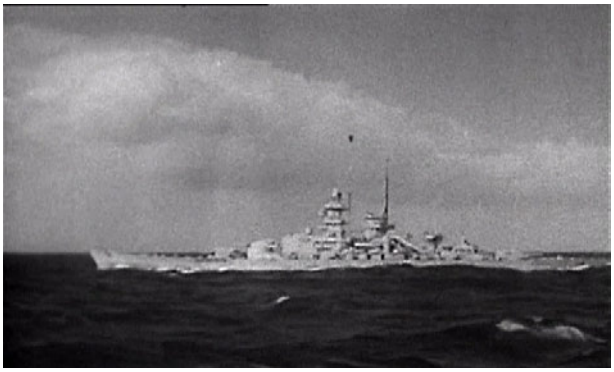


to try to help us understand the people and how their frame of mind was affected by what they saw at their theatres. The same goes for the interviews. It is surprising what the researchers were able to dig up. They even managed to get some of the earliest colour film

Every significant battle or fight is covered such as the disastrous raid on Narvik. The importance of air power is stressed. The documentary also covers the effects of the war on the civilian population. The first episode looks at Hitler's rise to power and offers suggestions as to why the German public was prepared to let him get away with his excesses. There are many interviews of major figures involved in the war, and a number of times the politicians are shown to be out of touch with reality as they discuss the importance of the speeches and debates and committees rather than the war itself. "The feeling of the meeting was passionate" – well, yes, but passion did not fight Germans. One of the sillier statements was that Britain should not bomb the German armaments factories as they were private property. A more chilling interview was with Himmler's adjutant who admitted attending an execution of Jews with his boss.

As well as the battles and the civilians, a chapter is devoted to the extermination camps. Jeremy Isaacs admitted, however, that even with 26 hours to fill he still had to leave out some of the war. The Yugoslavs, for instance, had to be omitted.

Isaacs concentrated on the major personalities and let their reminiscences narrate the progress of the war rather than have a "front man" as is

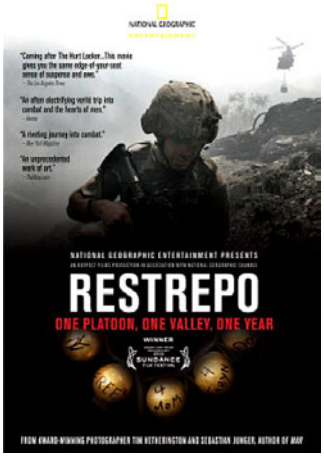


common with so many modern documentaries. He did not concentrate of tales of heroism as the drama films do. These were great films but they were not history. He let the images and interviewees carry the story with a minimum of narration. Many of the leading "personalities" of their day are shown to be idiots by their own words and actions. In the race between Montgomery and Patton to see who would be first to enter Germany, for instance, we see the folly of Montgomery's ill-prepared and poorly thought out raids to capture some major bridges in Holland. This has been comprehensively dealt with in the drama film A Bridge Too Far. The documentary presents the facts in a fair and non-judgmental way. Even so, I think the production staff may have been having a quiet dig at pompous politicians like Stafford Cripps when they covered his famous speech advising the government that Russia had no territorial ambitions – he had been told so by Stalin himself.

The narration by Laurence Olivier is deeply researched and beautifully spoken. He has an ideal dignified voice for this sort of work. His very dignity seems to add authenticity to the documentary. The series is a credit to its makers and to the War's millions of dead and displaced.



Restrepo
National Geographic
Madman
R4 DVD



In Synergy Volume 3 No 6 we looked at a documentary on U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan called Baker Boys. Their experience of the war made a deep impression on them but they were working in a fairly pacified province of the country. In this documentary we see what life is like at the dangerous end. The Korengal valley in eastern Afghanistan was effectively held by the Taliban. Any Allied patrol that entered the valley WOULD be attacked.

The people of the valley, like most Afghanis, cared little for the war. The border with Pakistan meant nothing to them and they regularly crossed it to meet and trade with friends and relatives on the other side. Many villagers were related to Taliban fighters across the border. Most villagers were hostile to the outsiders except where they could gain some advantage or financial benefit. In one example a cow wandered into the razor wire of an outpost and had to be killed. The meat was cut up and distributed to the villagers but they wanted more. They wanted monetary compensation. The officer in charge was told by his HQ that they would not sanction this but he could offer the weight of the cow in sugar and other food. The village council rejected this and insisted on the money.

This incident highlights a problem. With travel restricted the young men of the village cannot go to the bigger cities to earn money for their families. All that is left for them is the Taliban. The pay is poor but their families need the money.

To break the stalemate of the valley as a no-go area, it was decided to set up a forward operations post deep in the valley. A spot overlooking the main village was selected and a base was erected overnight. The post was named Restrepo in honour of a soldier killed early in the combat. It was manned by troops of 2nd Platoon, Battle Company.

The Taliban reaction was predictable. The post was in “their” territory was attacked savagely with as many as six or seven attacks each day. The soldiers sent out patrols knowing that each would be attacked. The Taliban still regularly slipped in and out of the village at night, supported by the local people.

We see the tense combat patrols, the sadness caused by the death of a comrade, we experience the recalcitrance and greed of the villagers, and we see the occasional moments of light relief that punctuate the otherwise dangerous life of a frontline soldier. In this respect the film is almost a complete contrast to Baker Boys. Strangely, we also see the adrenaline rush caused by enemy attack. It is as if this is how they get their kicks.

One again we see that the soldiers do not understand why they are there, let alone whether they should even be in the country. They are just soldiers doing the job they were ordered to do. The only one with any political awareness seems to be Capt Dan Kearney and he is constantly frustrated by the local people. The film does not go into the politics of the Afghanistan war. It is purely a film about the soldiers. It doesn’t look for sympathy for the soldiers either, just presents events as they were. In these respects it is a very powerful documentary.





Inside the Third Reich
2009
Germany
R1 DVD
Directed by Michael Kloft and Lutz Hackmeister
Distributed by First Run Features



English, and German with white subtitles over picture.

This impressive set includes large amounts of new footage, and war footage I have never seen before. It covers some of the areas previously only lightly explained in earlier documentaries and is the result of a lot of research and new material and sources being unearthed.

The Reich Underground

As the war turned against Germany, its leaders decided to move much of their production underground into huge caverns dug deep into the mountains. Some are still in use today by the German Army. Others were closed off except for regular inspection. Part One of this documentary largely follows Max Kabe of the Department of Mines Safety who checks the old tunnels and knows their dangers. In many tunnels the rock was never shored up. Others are flooded or the timber shoring has rotted away. Some old boreholes in unfinished tunnels (and most of them are unfinished) still have blasting charges in them.

There are poignant reminders of the war years in the abandoned tunnels – jet engines, a row of rocket motors. Hundreds of thousands of internees were diverted to the construction from the death camps. Max Mannheimer, a survivor, describes his experience at a 6-story aircraft production installation – three stories were underground. The huge concrete portal over the entrance to the tunnels is impressive, but it was smashed in by bunkerbuster bombs. 200,000 internees died on this installation alone. Life expectation was only 60 – 80 days. He weighed 37 kilos at liberation. He was lucky – other internees were sent to Dachau.



One of the largest of the tunnel systems was never used and even the local people don't know how big it was. Mostly unfinished, there is a huge risk of falling rocks. It was to be for manufacture of BMW aero engines. Mittelwerk-Dora near Nordhausen in the Harz mountains was for building V2 rockets. The cold and humidity in the tunnels led to tuberculosis outbreaks among the slave workers. Although parts of the huge complex are opened for tourists, most remains closed for safety. There is good footage of the earliest V2 launches, a history of V2 tactics, and details of the launching and construction of launch bunkers. Northern France has one of the war's largest V2 bunkers. It could store 500 missiles and was topped by a 55,000 ton 5-metre thick cupola covering a 15 metre high assembly hall. British bombers used 12,000 pound Tallboy bombs to bust the bunker. An interesting one is the Mimoyecques bunker, also in France, designed to fire the V3 "England Cannon"shells.

At Falkenhagen near Berlin a huge poison gas factory was being built for IG Farben.. Mustard Gas and Hydrocyanic Acid were to be produced, as well as a new terror – the nerve gas





Sarin was developed here. Production was personally ordered by Hitler, and was intended to reach 500 tonnes/month – enough to wipe out a city. Fortunately the factory was not completed and Sarin never went into production.

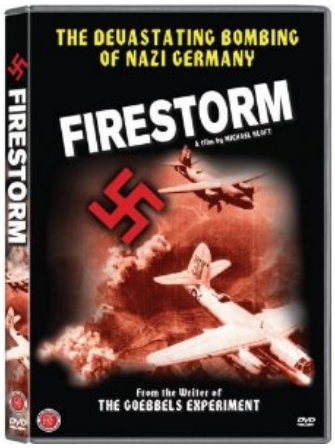
Part Two deals with the non-industrial tunnels and city air raid shelter complexes. The Ebensee tunnel complex was to be an underground HQ for the Luftwaffe, but was never used for this. It was converted to engine factories, but the map shows the huge nature of the intended project. In Poland another underground town for 29,000 people was planned and begun, but never finished. It was to be an emergency headquarters for Hitler.

Huge complexes of air raid shelters were built in the main cities – the biggest surviving one is in Dortmund. Tunnel building continued up to the end of the war as the shelters proved inadequate for the population. Some still exist as they were left in 1945. Berlin was to feature an underground highway system that could also be used as shelters – some are in use today as the Unterlinden.

Goebbels' private bunker was discovered under his villa in 1998 during building work. Bunkers under Berchtesgaden, Hitler's home at Obersalzburg, are explored for the first time in decades. Another large but unfinished complex, 6km long. includes a very deep SS bunker. Construction was organized by Martin Bormann. It was attacked by US bombers, which may explain why it was never used. Martin Bormann's private bunker under his home, guarded by machinegun posts, can only be entered now by special permit. This documentary contains what may be the only film footage existing of the well-finished bunker. Hitler barricaded himself and his remaining followers into the bunker under the Reichschancellery and committed suicide when he realized finally that the war was lost.. The documentary has rare footage of the bunker.

Exploration of salt mines found the accumulated loot of the Reich, hidden in hundreds of kilometers of old tunnels. It was found by U.S. soldiers on advice from some of the slave workers who survived the digging of the tunnels.

Firestorm



Over 1 million bombs were dropped on Germany during the war. Mass bombing was directed against civilians, just as the bombing of Rotterdam was directed against the Dutch and later the Blitz was against British civilians. Its intention was to demoralise civilians and overload refugee resources. The need for such warfare is still debated today, and is discussed in the documentary. Precision bombing was crude, and often a large part of a city was levelled to get a single factory complex anyway. Factories simply moved into the country or underground. This encouraged the growth of city-wide bombing as an alternative. The basis of the bombing was that "dehousing" people took them away from the factories and towns, depriving the in-





dustries of their workforce.

Development of British bombers and bombing/ marking techniques versus the development of the German fighter guidance system is covered in some detail. It is interesting that some German air raid shelters exist today, too well built to demolish economically. Arthur "Bomber" Harris organized the "moral bombing" of cities, knowing the old wooden city centers would burn well and set fire to the surrounding worker suburbs. Development of the small incendiary bomb allowed this weapon to be used for destruction out of proportion to the bomb's size. 300,000 incendiary bombs were dropped on Hamburg – it was regarded as a highly successful raid. This, the first Firestorm, killed 35,000 people.

Germany tried to hold on until the V-weapons could come on line and wreak retaliation on London. Tales of the survivors show a fatalism, and they asked themselves if they would ever be able to enjoy a quiet life again. Over 100 shot down Allied pilots and crew were lynched by Germans. Yet in the end firestorm bombing did not wear down German morale enough to stop them resisting the invasion. After five years of bombing, supplies were still flowing to the Wehrmacht. Germans got the V2 flying at last – too little, too late. Several thousand V2s hit Britain and 35,000 people were killed. Bombing of German cities continued but there is argument over whether this now represented a strategic weapon or simply revenge. In the spring of 1945 Dresden, ignored until now, was bombed on the excuse that it was a center of resistance against the advancing Russians. Thousands were killed. The city was still burning 24 hours later. Remaining attacks had no strategic value whatever. Swinemunde, a Baltic port filled with 22,000 people and an unknown number of refugees, was bombed by 100 bombers at Russian request. 15,000 died. It was an evacuation port, but had no military value. Germany would not surrender, so it was punished.

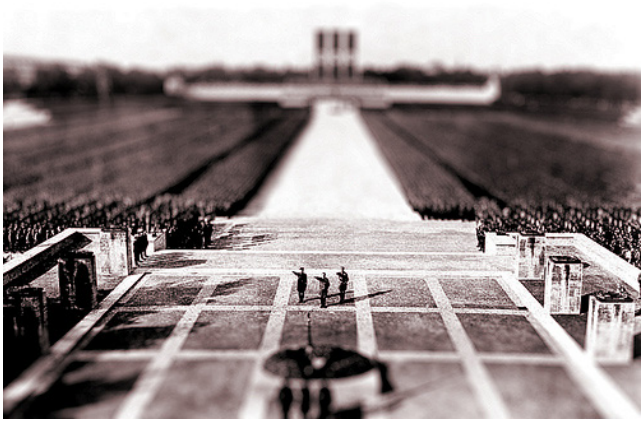
Television under the Third Reich

Since 1935 the first public TV broadcast in the world was going out from the Paul Nipkow studios in Berlin. 285 rolls of film were recently found in the Berlin National Film Archives. They were restored and copied, and some of the results appear in this documentary. They contain propaganda, entertainment, and news (called Topical Events or Topical Picture Broadcasting). They developed outside broadcasts, and later broadcast direct, but most were shot onto 35mm film and broadcast later. TV was something of a propaganda victory for Germany, but this documentary shows that they never used its possibilities to the fullest extent.

TV looked a little primitive compared with, say, Leni Riefenstahl's carefully set up films. Broadcast commentary was more like radio broadcasting. The film had long shots, with little cutting and editing. Quality was not great. Most entertainment was performances by leading radio personalities. Propaganda songs fitted well into the format. There were very few TV sets, mostly owned by technicians and party officials. Some public "television parlours" were available and proved popular. The TV sets needed constant careful adjustment. The 1936 Summer Olympics spurred interest. More parlours opened, better cameras were built, careful



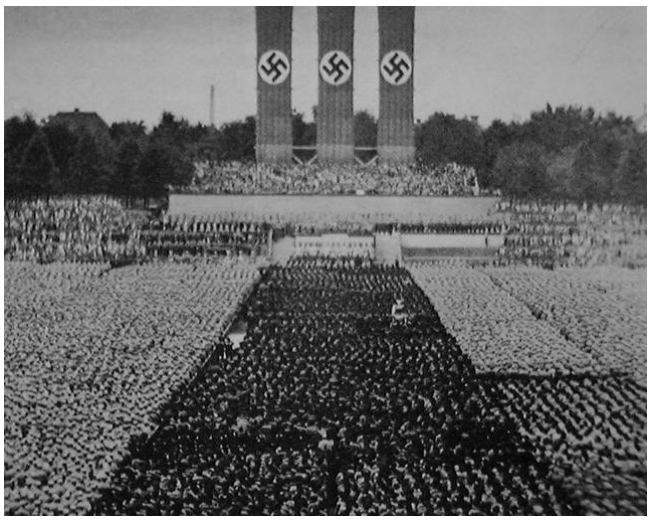




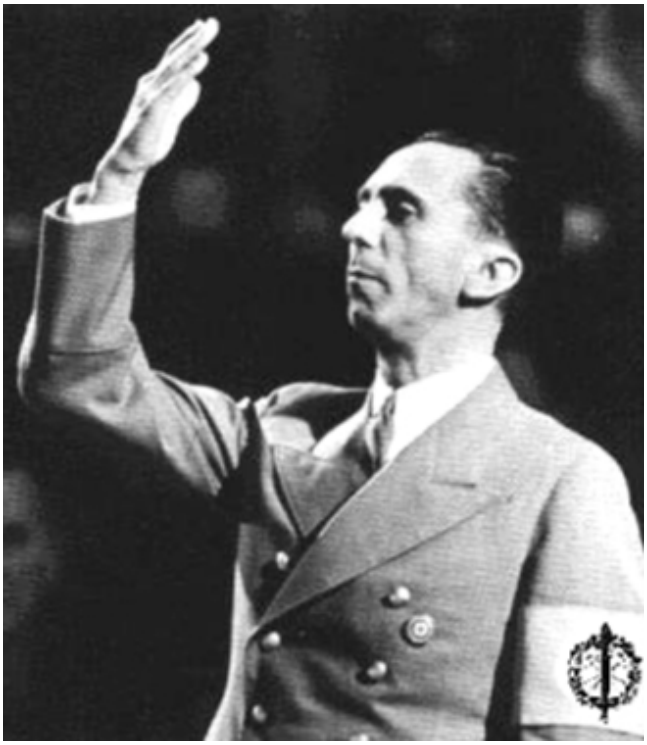
presentation and better narration were introduced. Vision at the Olympics was fed from the camera to a truck where it was transferred to film, developed instantly, then fed into a transmitter, all in less than a minute. It was something of a technical showpiece in spite of its underdeveloped status.

Programming matured, showing more of the German social infrastructure and daily life. News shared time with cooking shows, interviews with Party personalities, womens shows, sports, hunter's conventions "for the animals know that the hunters are their best friends" and, of course, Nazi parades. There was no critical journalism, though. Propaganda was becoming stronger on the new medium, although the Party still did not see much use for it. The documentary shows an early anti-Bolshevism exhibition, Goebbels railing against the Jews, and the Nuremberg rallies. 1936 saw the rally transmitted live, but still backed up to film. The quality of the sound and vision is remarkably good on the cleaned-up film. By 1937 they were broadcasting up to four hours per day (which included a lot of reruns). The search for content led to a lot of odd footage, such as on fish breeding, and this gives a snapshot of German life at the time. It is this that makes the archive particularly valuable.

The outbreak of war meant fewer resources to expand TV set production. Programming was more propaganda oriented. The first mention of "anthropological and race experiments" slipped into one documentary. Programming now included helpful hints for the hausfrau – how to make old clothes last for longer, cooking around shortages, home gardening and preserving of vegetables. There was no direct war footage, but communiqués and reports were inserted in the news. In spite of this, interest in TV was waning at an official level. To get themselves reclassified as an essential industry, the company turned to entertaining the troops. Eleven military hospitals were wired up for TV. A strong propaganda element crept in to convince the convalescing troops that everything was well in the German world. They also broadcast in France which had a thriving TV industry







of its own. It became harder to broadcast as the towers became targets for bombers. Poignantly, one of the last pieces of film in the documentary is a motivational talk to help legless soldiers make the most of their life. A young couple dancing : “So you’ve had both legs amputated?” “Yes, life is wonderful”

The Goebbels Experiment

This very personal documentary follows the life of Josef Goebbels through the entries in his diaries. They show his relationship with Hitler, and give a picture of a lonely boy who found in Hitler a hero he could worship. Goebbels was a sickly child with a damaged foot. He became a solitary





boy. He read a lot, including Hitler and other revolutionaries, and started to become anti-semitic.

He developed as an effective orator for the National Socialist Party, which he found satisfying. He met Hitler, came to like him, and came to believe in his political ideals. His contact with Hitler got him a job with the Party as an orator and meeting organizer.

After studying Sergei Eisenstein’s Ten Days That Shook The World, Goebbels took an interest in propaganda. This marked the beginning of a long period of internal conflict, highs and lows, as his career advanced and declined. In 1929 he was promoted to head of propaganda in Munich, a post he didn’t want as he thought he was being pushed out of the power center in Berlin. He saw this as a loss of interest in him by Hitler, but continued to do his best. As the Nazi party started to win elections, his morale improved. He moved back to Berlin and started to become the face of the Party, introducing Hitler at many public rallies. In Berlin he was undermined by the SA and Himmler, who were seeking their own power. With Hitler’s rise to political power he found himself sidelined again – he had hoped to become Minister for Broadcasting, Once again he lost faith in Hitler. By 1933 his propaganda expertise was becoming noticed internationally, a matter which gave him some pride. He reorganized the Ministries’ opinion makers to remove those he thought were less effective. He also started to give voice to his anti-semitic campaign. He was in his element organising the huge public specta-

cle rallies and parades. His fondness for his wife and children shows through in many diary entries.

The Minister for Propaganda position was becoming vacant, but once again it looked as if he may miss out. He still acted, though, as if he was already Minister. Infidelities discovered by his wife led to depression. He got back to work with anti-Jewish demonstrations, which seemed to lift his spirits somewhat. He also had to hold the Press in check while waiting for the invasion of England. He expressed admiration for Goering's handling of the air battle, in spite of previously calling Goering an oaf and a cocaine addict.

In 1941 everything was ready for the invasion of Russia and he prepared many speeches to justify the action. Goebbels certainly enjoyed the power, travelling around the growing German empire, but he still found time to wish Berlin could be made Jew-free. Around this time he spent a lot of his time developing propaganda in the German cinema industry.

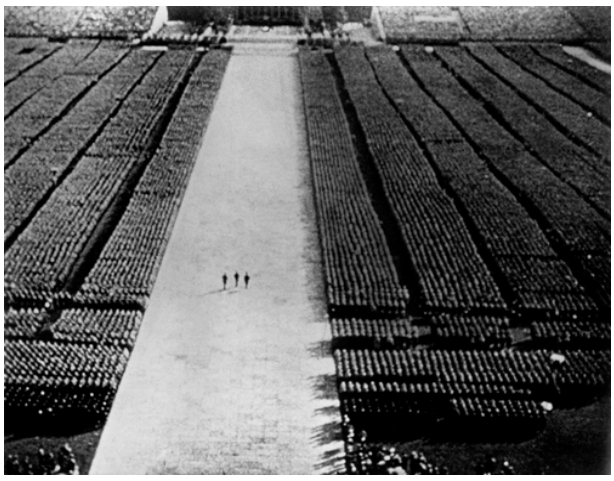
Goebbels respected Churchill's ability to do what he himself was doing, but he had nothing but contempt for the Reich Press Officer, Dietrich, who was already speaking of success in the East in spite of the facts. Goebbels' speeches were increasingly important to keep the German people wanting the "Total War" Hitler promised them, in spite of the sacrifices it would mean. This role became critical as air raids on German cities intensified, and supercritical as entire towns became firestorm targets. By the end of 1943 his diary entries showed pessimism creeping in. June 7, 1944, D-Day, saw him optimistic about repulsing the landing, although it appears he was not properly informed of the extent of the invasion or the inadequate preparations – in fact he seems to have been under the influence of his own propaganda. He was also overenthusiastic about the effects of the V weapons on the British. He noted that the Germans were now starting to want the truth, not glossy propaganda, and perhaps it was time to give it to them.

The realities of the Russian advance were getting closer to Berlin and the front was now only a few days from Berlin. Goebbels was still promoting Total War, although by now he appeared to be talking as much to convince himself as the

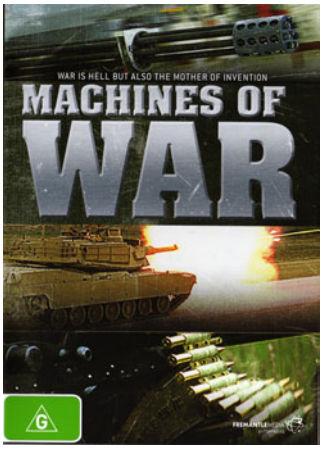


German troops. Was he losing touch with reality? Even as the Russians were in Berlin's suburbs, he was plotting revenge against a man in his old home town who was collaborating with the Americans. He continued making speeches until the end. This came in the main bunker under the Reichs Chancellery. He, his wife and children took poison, and his body was partly burnt.

I cannot praise this documentary set enough. It covers important details of the war that have been ignored before and makes best use of the recently rediscovered sources. The underground scenes are powerful and must have been achieved at some risk to the cameraman and crew. The use of Goebbels' diaries gives an insight into a man who was there almost from the start. The quantity and quality of rare or unpublished footage is impressive, giving a total length of over six hours. This set deserves a place on your shelf.



Machines of War
Documentary
Fremantle
Video Enterprises
R4 DVD



This DVD has been around since 2006, apparently as a TV series, but this is the first time I have seen it on DVD. Its three episodes are detailed summaries of specific military weapons – the tank, the machine gun and, surprisingly, the cruise missile. I say "surprisingly" because it is a largely ignored but critical modern weapon whose origins apparently go back to World War 1. We even get an explanation of the science needed to provide a strong enough propellant for the missiles and the development of the gyroscope to control the weapon.

Each weapon is taken all the way from the first ideas to the current incarnation. The machine gun episode has footage of the famous Gatling gun in action with a reenactment group. I have never seen anything as detailed as this. It also discusses the need to change tactics to effectively use this new weapon on the battlefield.

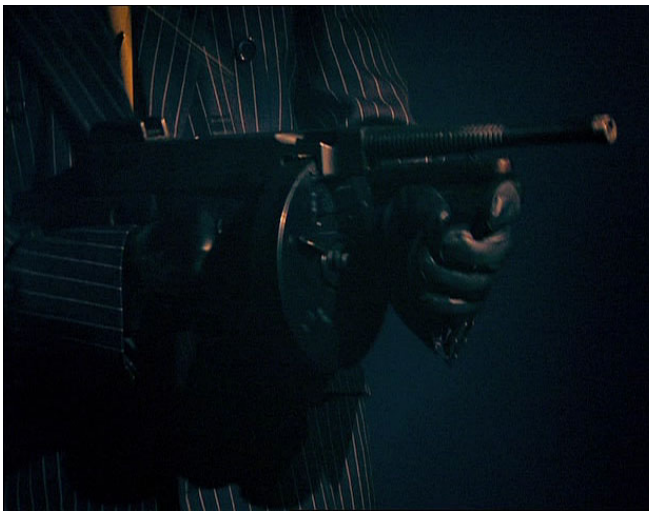
The discussion on tanks is particularly fascinating as it demonstrates the effect of various shaped charges and the principles of tank armour. Using melons to represent human bodies shows the true horror of what happens when a projectile hits a tank. As well as modern film of each weapon every episode is accompanied by



simple drawings showing the principles of operation. These drawings make it easy to study and understand the basic workings.

There are some things I would like to have seen included. The episodes tend to be rather American-centric, so important weapons like the Bren Gun have been left out (in fact World War II seems not to have happened except in the tank war). I guess this is a limitation in the made-for-TV format where the length of each episode is critical.

The series is a worthwhile addition to the library of any warfare student. It is comprehensive, detailed and contains a lot of valuable ideas and information. Dare I hope we might see the series added to in the future?





The Polish Battle of Britain
Documentary
SBS Australia
Madman
R4 DVD



One of history's fascinating little wartime facets was the number of overseas pilots who fought in the Battle of Britain. Many are undocumented or at least little recognised. This documentary deals with 303 Squadron, composed of Polish airmen who managed to get out as their country was being rolled over by Germany.

Many of these airmen made their way to Britain where they tried to join the RAF. Most knew no English so joining a British squadron was out of the question. They were formed instead into Polish training squadrons where they were taught rudimentary English, formation flying (they trained on bicycles) and eventually how to fly the Hawker Hurricane.

They also had to learn the British way of doing things in the RAF. The frustration of the pilots is well shown in the dramatisations that comprise much of the film. There is a light note in the comment that pilots were used to aircraft with fixed undercarriages in the Polish Air Force, and a number of pilots forgot to put their wheels down before landing.

Britain was in serious trouble at this time. Waves of German bombers were attacking Britain and despite improved deliveries of aircraft, Britain's biggest shortage was pilots. The problem has been well explained in the film The Battle of Britain (1969). Air Chief Marshall Dowding tells a subordinate that "our young men must shoot down their young men at the rate of five to one" or Britain will collapse. Incidentally the documentary draws heavily on this older film for a lot of its aircraft and combat footage. The British pilots weren't even getting two to one, so the situation was desperate. Finally a Polish training flight accidentally got mixed up in a dogfight and threw themselves at the German aircraft.



They achieved a kill rate that amazed their superiors. They would close to almost suicidal range on a German bomber then pour bullets into it until it crashed. Unknown to the British many of the Poles already had extensive battle experience from fighting in France as they made their way to Britain. One already had eleven kills to his name. Finally and most important, they hated the Germans.

Led by a British officer, Lt Kent (they christened him "Kentoffski") the mass of new highly trained pilots made the difference.







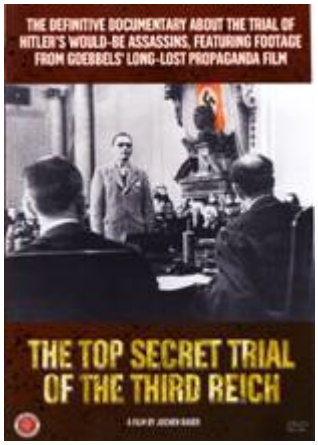
One pilot, Josef Franticek, was one of Britain's leading aces. Other Poles were not far behind him.
303 Squadron destroyed more enemy aircraft than most other squadrons. A confirmed figure of 40 "kills" was recorded but a further 30 – 40 were unable to be verified.

After the War there was another tragedy. Churchill, unwilling to fight a war with the Russians, meekly let them have Poland. This betrayal destroyed the Poles. One said that Britain had won the war but Poland had lost. Most elected to stay in Britain where some married and raised families.

The documentary is based on a diary kept by a succession of pilots, so it is a more personal history than most. It goes some way to redressing the injustice done to these brave men.



The Top Secret Trial of the Third Reich
Director Jochen Bauer
Producer Bengt von Zer Muehlen
Chronos Film Production
First Run Features
R1 DVD



English narration; much of the film is in German with clear subtitles

This film is another of First Run's collection of rare and unusual World War 2 German documentaries. The history of the military part of the War has generally been well documented, but First Run is filling in the gaps and revealing a lot of background that has been previously unpublished, become lost or is out of print. In this film we look at the men who tried, on a number of occasions, to kill Hitler. They were unsuccessful but the punishment meted out to them was brutal and their trials were a farce.

The first attempt was in Munich's Burgerbraukellar. A bomb planted in a pillar of the beer hall went off only a few minutes after Hitler prematurely left the building. The final attempt was by a group of Germans in which a military officer, Claus von Stauffenberg, planted a bomb under a conference table. Hitler was injured but not killed and the retribution was savage.

The show trials of the conspirators in this last case were secretly filmed, and it is this film which makes up the bulk of the footage. The trial judge of the Special Peoples Tribunal, Roland Freisler, obviously believes it is his mission to kill every conspirator who appears before him. His performance in the court is insane – he postures for the cameras, he screams, bangs on his desk, abuses the suspects and humiliates them.

"You ought to be ashamed – this talk about conditions in Germany. Our Fuehrer IS Germany"

Few escaped the death sentence. The Peoples Tribunal was established by Hitler in 1934 to root out and punish "Enemies of the State".



Even inaction, failure to report suspicions of anti -Nazi actions, constituted treason. This excuse was used to order the deaths of nearly 1000 priests who had received confession from conspirators. It was also used against Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, who was given the choice of suicide or a show trial and the death of his family.

Joseph Goebbels arranged to have the film released to the public, but instead of the hoped-for reaction, people actually sympathized with some of the victims. Perhaps it was the first time they realised just how far the Nazis had taken



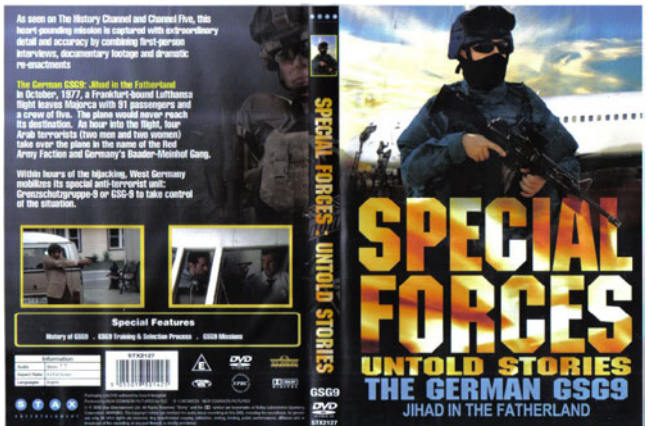
over their country when such a farcical trial was presented to them as justice?

The film was withdrawn and destroyed. This documentary is compiled from the one remaining copy. Quality is poor but it is enough to convey the style of the trial and Freisler's posturing. The victims / suspects face a kangaroo court, not even allowed belts to hold up their trousers. They were once important influential men, now they are just minor performers in a show trial that will end in their slow painful death.

The film is particularly poignant because it shows the last home-grown resistance to Hitler. Without anyone left to face Hitler, the Allies assumed the country was all pro-Nazi. They proceeded to do dreadful damage to Germany that may have been reduced if Hitler could have been assassinated. Although the conspiracies against Hitler did not play a significant part in the War, this film is important in that it shows that there was some internal resistance, but that resistance was in the end futile.







Special Forces:
Untold Stories
Pinnacle Films
R4 DVD



There have been many Special Forces groups over the years. The concept of a covert military group with many special talents goes back to WWII , to David Stirling's British Special Air Service. Unlike the Commandos they were meant to operate behind enemy lines and generally cause havoc. Gradually the Special Forces role has become more defined according to their country's needs. Now most Special Forces in most countries are designed for insurgency, anti-terrorist work and those areas where their superb training gives them an edge over the enemy. This is often but not always as a supplement to existing ground troops.





This series covers the Special Forces of the United States (the Green Berets), Germany (the GSG-9), the Dutch Marines and the British SAS. Although the films cover much of each group in general, the stories revolve around a particular incident to show how they put their training into operation. For instance we see a re-enactment of the retaking of an aircraft at Mogadishu airport after it was hijacked in an attempt to free members of the Baader-Meinhoff gang.

There are no ra-ra heroics in the episodes. Films like John Wayne's Green Berets and the appalling A-Team do nothing for the reputation of the real soldiers. What we see in the series is a highly trained group of men doing their difficult job as best they can. They are remarkably subdued about the conflicts in which they have taken part, possibly because such conflicts often involve the loss of their friends.

This is a worthwhile series for the reality it brings to one of the world's nastiest jobs.



War Made Easy
How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death
Media Educational Foundation
DVD
Web: http://www.mediaed.org/

Narrated by Sean Penn and developed from Norman Solomon's 2005 book by directors Loretta Alper and Jeremy Earp, *War Made Easy* is an impressive documentary focusing on role of media in government, peace and war. There are lots of anti war docos these days and while most of these have a lot to say, it is too easy to be put off by constant polemics and at times, well meaning but meandering arguments.

War Made Easy takes a different approach, offering what is primarily a media analysis of the packaging of war marketing by both the press and the government.

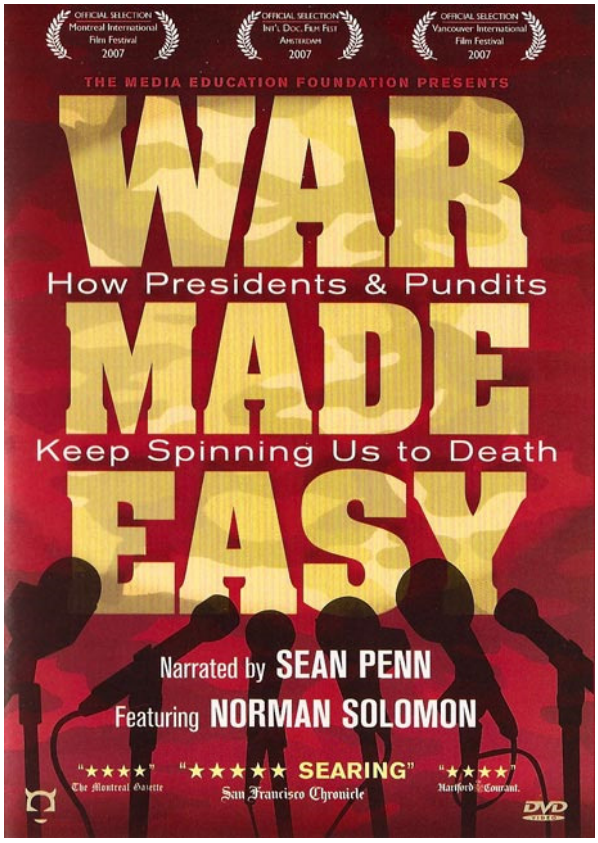
This approach is very different from the vast majority of docos presently on the market and pays dividends. It is informative and communicates extremely well.

While certainly it has a critical view of the United States foreign policy ranging from Vietnam to Iraq, the approach is not to make a "value judgement" about the military actions involved, but to focus on whether the American public were really given enough information to make a educated decision about the nature of the conflict.

This focus on the media, government spin doctoring and the nature of democracy is insightful and in many ways cuts to the quick about United States foreign policy. The issue becomes one of transparency and honest, rather than one about "doves" and "hawks".

One of the more interesting discussions in the film is on the fact that during World War II, even though the causality rate was rising, most Americans continued to think it was a "just war" right to the end. It was only during the Vietnam era and beyond, when spin and media manipulation was used to justify entering wars on false pretences that the public become wary and public confidence waned.

In other words, the issue is not with a necessary war per see, but with the deliberate use of war



for a dishonest end and the packaging of that war through government and media deception.

This is a superbly presented doco with a wide range of primary source materials ranging from early information of the Gulf of Tonkin incident (where the US government deliberately falsified an incident to enter the war) right through to Iraq. It uses snapshots of reports from Fox, MSNBC and CNN to show just how compromised their reporting really is and especially takes aim at the ludicrous concept of embedding journalists with the military, where emotional bonding and peer pressure assure the sort of reporting the government needs.

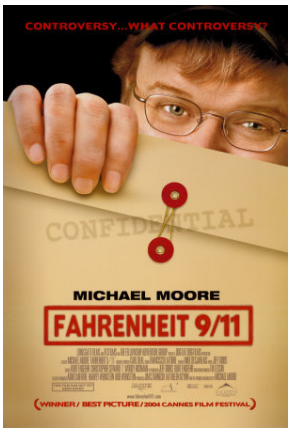
This is an informed, intelligent and well presented documentary, which is based on clear and critical thinking about the media and hence has a lot to offer. I believe that its message is also more general than simply "war journalism" as it reflects on all aspects of reporting and journalism and on the need for a new analytical approach to current affairs and indeed, in everyday life.

MICHAEL MOORE



Michael Moore is without a doubt the world's most controversial documentary maker, especially in the social awareness area. He first came to public notice with his TV series *The Awful Truth* in which he confronted business executives with facts and photos on the damage their companies were causing. This confrontational style has been a characteristic of his work since then. He has also included political parties in his targets and this as much as anything has earned him many enemies. With governments in particular it has become a case of "ignore the message, shoot the messenger". A simple Google search for "Michael Moore" will bring up many anti-Moore websites such as http://www.mooreexposed.com/.

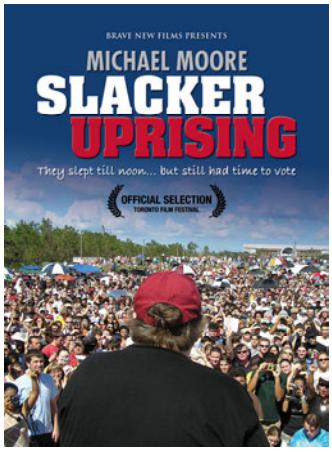
A lot of these websites depend for their appeal on highlighting occasional errors in Moore's films and books. Whether these errors exist or are misinterpreted I can't say, but the documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) shows a string of events (coincidences?) that may or may not be connected. If true they should be grounds for a major federal inquiry. *Fahrenheit 9/11* is the highest-grossing documentary ever. The Disney organization refused to release the film to theatres because it might endanger tax breaks they were getting from Jeb Bush, Florida's governor and George W Bush's younger brother. It and the other Moore documentaries have often only been released on DVD and the internet, but this way the information at least gets out.



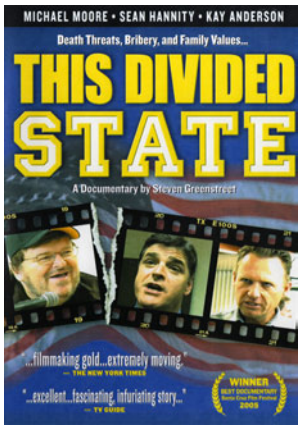
This seems to be what Moore wants – to bring the information out into the open for discussion rather than leave it hidden to protect the guilty. I tend to believe him because there have been plenty of avenues to shut him down in court, but nobody so far has had the nerve to try it. He is currently the producer of four of the highest-grossing documentaries ever made so a lot of Americans are watching his work with interest. Michael Moore's pudgy unshaven face is now recognisable throughout the United States.

One thing that makes Americans very uncomfortable about Moore is his attitude to Americans themselves. When they are too lazy to vote, they WILL get a corrupt and unaccountable government. The government will be run by the powerful few for their own benefit. Moore said, *"Democracy is not a spectator sport, it's a*

participatory event. If we don't participate in it, it ceases to be a democracy. So Obama will rise or fall based not so much on what he does but on what we do to support him."



His documentary *Slacker Uprising* discusses the general laziness of the population with regard to their right to vote. He urged citizens to get out and vote at the next national election. In some swinging states he gave away noodles and underwear packs to reward young students who said they would vote. The Michigan Republican Party threatened to have him charged with buying votes. Because he was just urging people to vote, not to vote for a particular party, no prosecutor would proceed with a case. Score 1 for freedom of speech.



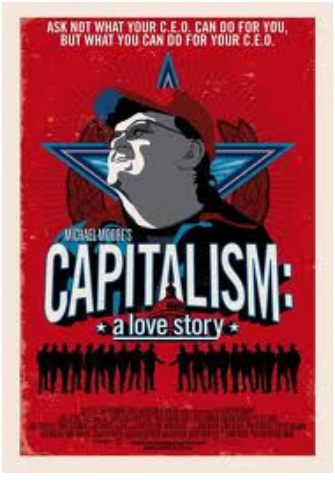
In another score for free speech Steven Greenstreet documented the story of Moore's visit to Orem in Utah to talk to students there in his documentary *This Divided State* (2005). Orem is a city that is 75% Mormon and fanatically pro-Republican. Moore was invited by the student council of Utah Valley University to speak at the University in the run-up to the federal election. The bigoted citizens reacted with a hate campaign, despite the US Constitution guaranteeing freedom of speech (the same Constitution that protects their strange religion). They decided that Moore's type of freedom of speech should not be permitted in their state. There was a massive public debate and a media blitz, death threats against Moore and the student council, bribes and lawsuits. Such was the hatred for Moore. Apparently in Utah free speech is an optional thing to support, and only when it coincides with your views.



This Divided State Protest

Greenstreet let the townspeople speak for themselves on camera, much as Moore does. Their rantings would be more appropriate to a bunch of inbred redneck drunks in a southern town, not to supposedly responsible citizens of a strongly religious community.

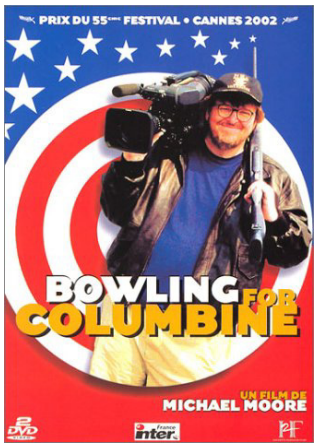
Moore drew more adverse attention when he publicly stated that George W Bush was absent without leave while serving in the National Guard. This claim was initially proven by documents available but some time later the papers read differently. A close examination showed they had been retyped and altered on a computer, not the original typewriter. In view of these revelations the matter quietly fizzled out, but Moore could now add Bush supporters to the list of those who hated him.



His recent documentary *Capitalism: a Love Story* (2009) goes once again for his favourite target, the industrialists and businessmen who are becoming phenomenally wealthy at the expense of poorer Americans. It covers their actions during the transition from the Bush era to the Obama administration, when the outgoing government seemed willing to pass any legislation that would profit their business friends. Many of these actions led to the Global Financial Crisis.



Even Moore's first documentary, *Roger and Me* (1989) looked at the closure of an auto plant in Flint, Michigan and the relocation of the jobs to Mexico where the labour was cheaper. *The Big One* (1997) expanded on this and cited many other companies, including Nike, for outsourcing their work to other third world countries. *"The problem is the profit motive: for corporations, there's no such thing as 'enough'"* – Moore.



Moore has not confined himself to attacking politicians and big business. Some of his better documentaries are in the field of what might loosely be called "human rights" *Bowling For Columbine* (2002) discusses the American love affair with guns, that culminated (at that time) in the massacre at Columbine High School of a number of people by a mentally unsound student. Predictably the powerful U.S. gun lobby and the National Rifle Association were enraged that anyone might suggest that guns were too easy to get and might be owned by people whose mental stability could be called into question. The TV networks were also incensed at Moore's suggestion that they played up violence on their news broadcasts and were largely responsible for inciting the general fear that led people to feel that a gun is necessary for defence.



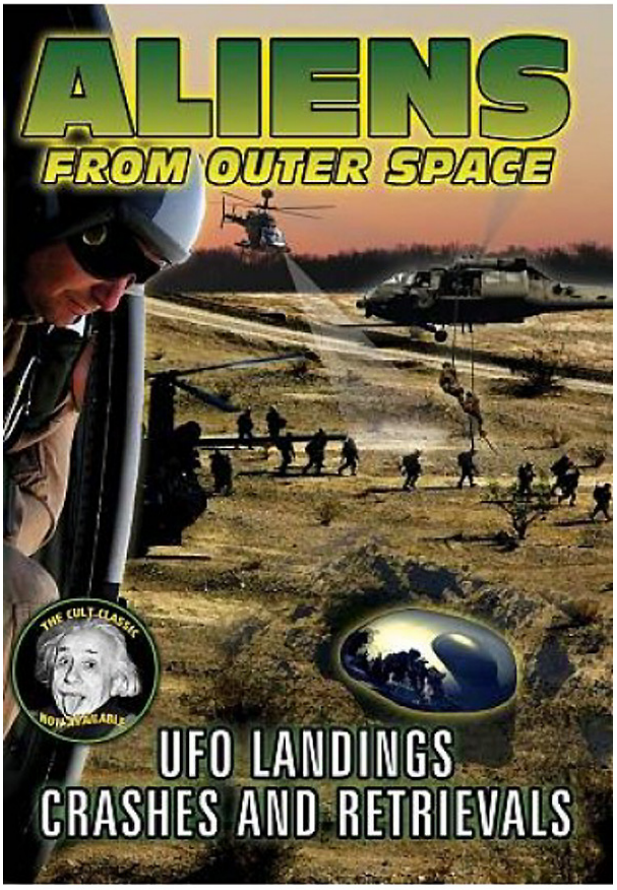


His current campaign is for reforms to the U.S. health system, such as it is. *Sicko* (2007) blames America's third word health system on the huge drugs industry who will fight to preserve their high margins on drugs, even though the same drugs can be bought overseas for a fraction of the price. The managed health care industry, for which read private hospitals and health insurance companies, also comes in for its share of embarrassment. Other countries manage to provide a basic health care system inexpensively or for free but in the U.S. it is a means to profit from the lower social classes. Millions have been spent to block Obama's reforms and incidentally to smear *Sicko* and Moore.

In the recent Wikileaks affair Moore has appeared twice in the cables released so far. When *Fahrenheit 9/11* was to be shown at a campaign meeting by a local politician in New Zealand the American embassy staff persuaded his party not to let him run it. The embassy foolishly sent a self-congratulatory cable back home patting themselves on the back for blocking Moore (and successfully interfering with the politics of a sovereign nation). *"... It is probable that this potential fiasco may only have been averted because of our phone calls -- it is apparent to us that neither the Minister nor anyone else in the Labour government seems to have thought there was anything wrong with a senior Minister hosting such an event."* Moore says "*And I ask you, is it fair to pose the question: If they were this focused on some insignificant screening in New Zealand, what else were they up to? And I don't mean in regards to me. I mean anyone who was on their enemies list ... ".* No wonder that when Julian Assange, owner of Wikileaks, was arrested in Britain Moore offered $20,000 towards his bail.

Moore's documentaries will not change the world overnight. Change will be slow as people try to recover the democracy they have surrendered. Moore's films may at least help them realise what they have lost.

Aliens From Outer Space
Documentary
Reality Films
R1 DVD



The 1950s was the period of the flying saucers. Following the tremendous and rapid development of science and rocketry during World War II peoples' interest was now becoming focussed on "up there". Science Fiction was now being based on science fact, not fantasy. Early pictures and drawings of strange beings were now being reinterpreted by believers to "prove" aliens regularly visited the planet. UFOs were not a new phenomenon. Unexplained sightings by WW2 pilots were called "Foo fighters". Civilian sightings described them as cigar shaped, like a Zeppelin.

The name "Flying Saucer" came from a private pilot, Kenneth Arnold, who in 1947 described strange flying objects that flew like a stone skipping across the water. He likened them to a broken saucer with a cup inverted on the top. The media picked up on the description and coined the phrase "flying saucer". Perhaps we should ask how accurately the media was reporting later sightings? Were they accurate, or were the newspaper reports trivialised like so much of our news is now?

The U.S. Air Force's Project Blue Book found that 95% of sightings could be readily explained by natural events. Thus was born one of the world's longest-running conspiracy theories. It did not explain the remaining 5% but refused to accept extra-terrestrial origins. There was simply no evidence of such origins. Many sightings were verified by professional airline and military pilots, people who lived near airports and were familiar with aircraft of different types, and even astronauts. There were so many reports that the Air Force couldn't deny them so they left them open to conjecture.


Lights Over Phoenix, Arizona in 1997

Some of the 5% may have been genuine. During the early 1940s when UFOs were first reported in numbers Northrop was flight testing its Flying Wing bomber prototypes under conditions of great secrecy. In spite of this it was seen on a number of occasions and reported as a UFO. The military naturally denied all knowledge of aircraft in the area for security reasons, leading to quite valid claims of a Government cover-up.

They had the same problem in later years with the Stealth aircraft. Making a bit of allowance for artistic licence, these aircraft somewhat resembled the descriptions of UFOs and the drawings from witness descriptions when viewed from different angles. Unfortunately the documentary gives this only passing mention.

Bill Knell says he divides people into two main groups – the sceptics who want more evidence and the True Believers who will see a UFO as

the first and probably only explanation for any phenomenon. He rates himself as somewhere in the middle and the tone of the documentary at first seems to reflect this. He concentrates on the unexplained sightings and draws few conclusions. He just presents the history, but later in the film it is often subtly slanted in favour of the True Believers. His beliefs come out more strongly as the film progresses. The weakness of his approach is, like so many conspiracy theories, a simple lack of supporting evidence in too many cases. He has a tendency sometimes to voice opinions as facts but expresses them as questions rather than assertions. This way you don't have to provide corroboration.

Some of the information presented is slanted to give it a more sinister look. Porton Down in Britain is called a "top secret Government installation". Yes it is, but it is and was well known as the British centre for chemical and biological warfare research among other uses. Not Flying Saucer research. A separate wing now also tests new high-tech weaponry there. There is nothing mysterious about it but it is a good example of how "facts" can be inferred without having to prove them.

For the last half of the documentary Knell covers many individual cases. So many of the reports are based solely on human sightings. The unanswerable question becomes "how reliable are these people?". Many sightings were made and reported by reputable people whose reports should be taken seriously. We are often supplied with the names and qualifications of the witnesses, which is a strong point in the documentary's favour.

However a burst of sightings often results from one published report, then carries on for a few weeks until the hysteria dies out. The later reports usually describe UFOs remarkably similar to the first reports. Is it just people who want their moment of glory, or those who will tend to see a UFO in anything unusual? Knell plays this down.

He actually goes to the trouble of testing one of the reports of a man who claimed responsibility for the source of a sighting. The hoax involved using helium balloons to lift a commercial road flare. The test showed that the balloons simply couldn't lift a flare as described by the hoaxer. There needs to be more research like this applied to sightings. Now stories are surfacing about alien abductions, anal probes and so on. How much credibility can we give these reports? Alternatively, on a recent TV interview arguing whether Creationism should be taught in schools as science, one participant asked "How much time can we keep wasting on these loonies?". That question applies to the True Believers as well.

I tried to find some of the raw evidence for UFO reports listed in the documentary on the Internet. This can be a useful tool for testing the validity of the reports. I gave up after half an hour because the whole business seems to have been hijacked by True Believers. There are names and dates available in the documentary which simply can't be checked. Then I checked on Bill Knell to see what his qualifications were – another useful tool to check the authority of a documentary. What I found was a number of sites warning people about Knell and openly suggesting fraud. They allege that he runs "seminars" on UFOs to the True Believers, but that most of his information has just been gathered from the Internet. He is also accused of compiling documentaries like this one from information pirated from the Internet in violation of copyright. This would explain the amateur quality of the film's production. There are gaps where new scenes begin, the sound cuts off abruptly, and often Knell pauses in his narrative so the video can catch up. His speech is hesitant and often words or names are incorrectly pronounced. This does not inspire confidence in the documentary.

At over three hours this is a long film. This is because of the last half going into all the detail on specific cases. This level of detail presents a much stronger case than unsupported assertions, but it can't be convincingly checked. Regardless of the film's problems (and Knell's) it offers a useful, comprehensive study of many UFO cases.

By the end of the film his slant is obviously that of a True Believer but the information included is a useful starting point to the subject. Make up your own mind about UFOs. Caveat Emptor, though.

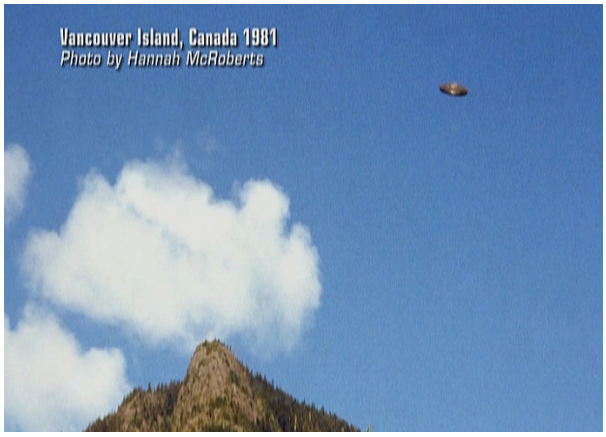
I Know What I Saw
Eagle Entertainment
R4 DVD

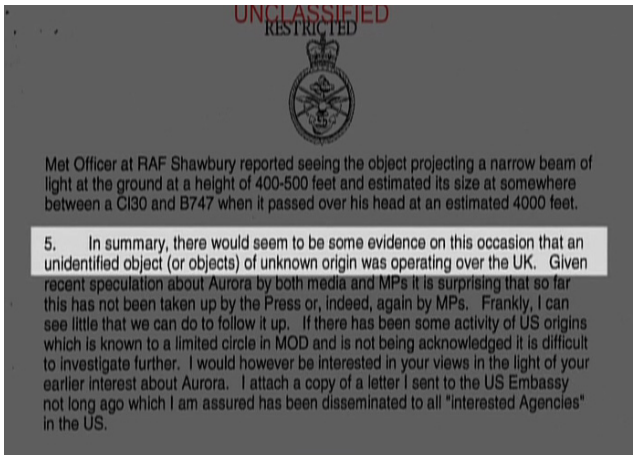
UFOs. Fact or overactive imagination or wishful thinking? It can be hard to take UFO reports seriously as they conflict with each other, are often not corroborated, or are too simply explained by natural and man-made phenomena. The serious UFO sightings, when all logically explained ones are deducted from the total, are still around 5 percent of the sightings. It is this 5 percent that interests James Fox, self-described UFO investigator.

The documentary begins with brief clips following a major appearance above Phoenix, Arizona in 1997. These UFOs were a little different in that the lights of the UFO appeared in a boomerang shape to some people, although there were reports of other shapes.

So far go good but the documentary than degenerates to conspiracy theory. "They (the Government) just ignored it. ". No, they didn't. They checked and found that a group of A10 Warthog attack aircraft had been dropping high intensity magnesium flares at the time. The thing about conspiracy theorists is that in the face of a credible explanation they still don't believe it (well, the government would say that, wouldn't they?), and so it proved in Arizona. People with no experience of magnesium flares were declaring that it couldn't have been flares because the lights didn't look like flares. According to these people any investigations are played down on the orders of the CIA.

"Reports made by a group of credible observers of incredible things"- Military Spokesman. How credible are the observers? Just being a pilot, military man or civilian doesn't give you any particular credibility unless you can get close




UNCLASSIFIED
RESTRICTED

Met Officer at RAF Shawbury reported seeing the object projecting a narrow beam of light at the ground at a height of 400-500 feet and estimated its size at somewhere between a CI30 and B747 when it passed over his head at an estimated 4000 feet.

5. In summary, there would seem to be some evidence on this occasion that an unidentified object (or objects) of unknown origin was operating over the UK. Given recent speculation about Aurora by both media and MPs it is surprising that so far this has not been taken up by the Press or, indeed, again by MPs. Frankly, I can see little that we can do to follow it up. If there has been some activity of US origins which is known to a limited circle in MOD and is not being acknowledged it is difficult to investigate further. I would however be interested in your views in the light of your earlier interest about Aurora. I attach a copy of a letter I sent to the US Embassy not long ago which I am assured has been disseminated to all "interested Agencies" in the US.

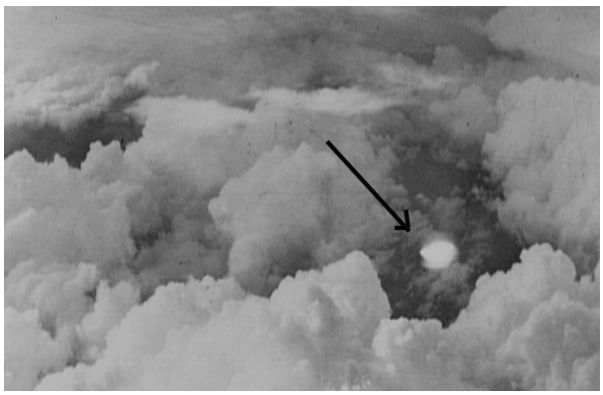
enough to the object to positively describe it. In most cases all they saw was lights.

Much is made of the speed and agility of the UFOs. No mention is made of the perceived speed of lower objects versus those higher up. I have seen a searchlight used for an advertising event in Sydney reflecting off low clouds or smoke, something like the Bat-signal in the old Batman cartoons. The glowing blob moved across the sky at a phenomenal rate as the searchlight was swung around. Nothing made on earth could move that fast, so it had to be a UFO of course. Or just a moving searchlight?

F-111 aircraft on nighttime training missions used to regularly pass over. When they were moving away from us low and fast in the distance they displayed two glowing balls of light from their tailpipes. These are even more spectacular if the pilot dumps fuel into the afterburners. They are not really UFOs, though.

On one occasion I saw a glowing lense-shaped ball of light in the evening sky. It was the moon reflecting off a lenticular cloud – we watched the cloud beginning to break up, probably as the wind came up. For a while, though, it looked like the traditional flying saucer.

We sometimes made a sort of hot air balloon from a green garbage bin liner bag with a small amount of burning rag held by thin wire to keep the balloon aloft. At night as it rose and was carried away by the wind it looked like a pulsing blob of green light – quite like a UFO. One witness to the Arizona UFO described it as "floating down Scottsdale Road". This sounds more like a cooling hot air balloon than a UFO. I offer these examples from my own experience to show why I tend to look for a rational explanation first rather than cry "UFO" at anything



unusual in the sky.

When the sightings are sorted except the unidentified five percent, before we put them down to UFOs there are still unanswered questions. If aliens cross space to reach us, why don't they make contact when they get here? They would have been able to pick up our radio and TV transmissions so why can't they speak one or more languages? Why do the photographs that exist generally just show a ball of light? Surely after half a century there should be sharp, clear photos that can be corroborated with other sharp, clear photos of the same UFO? It's not as if cameras are rare these days. The photos shown in the film are ambiguous.

The American Press Club hosted a meeting of military men, researchers, and others who believe in UFOs. Fox uses these people, right or wrong, to add strength to his beliefs – the authority figures who bring credibility to a conspiracy theory. Although the U.S. Air Force's investigation, Project Blue Book, was finished many years ago for lack of conclusive evidence, this was a coverup according to the theorists. They have evidence that the investigations are still being carried on clandestinely.

The film goes into the secrecy of the investigations. Why are governments hiding their investigations? (Note: not "ARE they hiding their investigations?":but WHY are they? This disallows the simplest possibility that they may have stopped investigating because there was nothing found to investigate. If there was no risk to aviation there is no reason to investigate further.

The film does not address "mass hysteria ". This is not about a group of people running around screaming, but an influence that is absorbed into the literature and colours peoples' reports. Ever since an alien was first depicted as small with a teardrop-shaped head and huge eyes, sightings of aliens have mostly described this shape. Before they were so depicted they were the "little green men" of UFO myth or skinny silver-clad beings as per Hollywood depictions. These negative aspects of UFO belief have been left out or glossed over. The kidnappings, anal probes, interbreeding and electrical interference that can stop a vehicle are avoided. Even the conspiracy theorists accept that there are idiots among their "believers".

"*A conspiracy wrapped in superstition and myth*".

Examining this film critically I was struck by how misleading it really is. It starts with the certainty that UFOs exist. It is not a documentary about UFOs so much as a documentary trying to justify those who already believe. It swamps us with information, much of it irrelevant, and treats too many mere possibilities as facts. It uses authority figures as "proof" of the UFO theory without telling us much about the qualifications of the authorities. You may be a four-star general, but does that make you a UFO expert? Most of the evidence is not first hand but is from radio conversations, reports and similar non-visual sources. This evidence has been filtered through the belief that UFOs exist and possibly more has been made of it than was in the original subject matter.

Although the film has value as a compendium of UFO film and information, it is also misleading in that it tries to make a conspiracy theory out of vague evidence. As an example of conspiracy theory, though, it is one of the best I have seen. It should be used in High Schools to teach critical thinking.



Battlefield Britain
Documentary
BBC / ABC /
Roadshow
R4 DVD



There is something rather rousing about being on a spot where a major action took place. To see what the combatants saw, to follow their movements during the battle, and perhaps to see the remnants and reminders is a powerful feeling. The traditional abbreviated version of history often covers these with a curt "In xxxx A defeated B in the Battle of ABCD". But what happened during the battle itself? What was it like for the soldiers? Why were so many battles decided largely by an incorrect decision by one leader? Why did they make that disastrous decision? This series covers a number of the major battles fought on or over British soil over the centuries, from the Roman occupation to the Battle of Britain.

Each episode uses extensive computer graphics and quite good animations to show the battle's progress in a clear way. Peter and Dan Snow, the show's father and son presenters, describe clearly the ebb and flow of the battles. Sometimes they can trace the movements of the combatants on the ground from the features still remaining – a hill or bog, a hedgerow, ruins. You now look at these ruins with a new



perspective.

Often re-enactment groups are used to show what a typical soldier of the period looked like, what weapons he carried and how he used them. The weapons may seem quaint to us now but at the time they were generally the best killing weapons available. Even today a sixteen foot long pike looks deadly and you can appreciate how it must have looked to a charging horseman. This was, despite its age, still savage warfare. The killing was a very closeup affair. The victors, as is pointed out often during the episodes, were usually the ones who were better disciplined in their fighting, better trained and sometimes better equipped. One scene that still sticks in my memory is of a Roman technique of arranging their troops in a saw-tooth formation. This funnelled their attackers deeper into the Roman formation where they could be attacked from two sides. It must have required tremendous discipline to hold that formation in the face of thousands of charging Britons, and tremendous skill to keep the formation intact when the line was ordered to move forward into and over the bodies of their enemies. The CG explains the technique clearly and leaves you with a slight feeling of horror and awe at just how efficient a killing machine a









disciplined army was, even in those days.

While Peter explains the history leading up to each battle his son Dan will be examining and trying out the weapons where possible. Dan will climb down to the bottom of a stream valley to find out why troops didn't go that way or experience the high-G effects of a very fast fighter plane, even if he must fly in a newer plane rather than the genuine article. Dan also gets to carry the heavy sixteen-foot pike overnight to see how the soldiers could cover such distances in short times, and to ford freezing rivers while trying to keep a bag of gunpowder dry. This brings a reality to the dry history. The extra detail really does make a difference to our understanding of a battle.

There are weaknesses in the series. The re-enactments are generally very good but often the descriptions must be padded out with modern film footage. When you talk of Boudicca's army moving to sack Londinium a shot of the "Gherkin", a very modernistic building, is incongruous. Similarly the shot of Edinburgh with a very prominent power station in the centre of the picture.

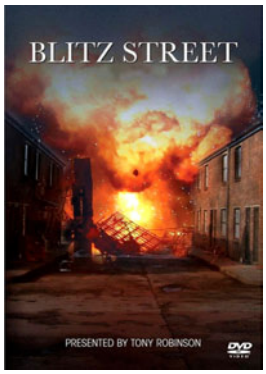
When you talk of German bombers attacking the London docklands a modern film clip of the Thames seems out of place. In each episode there are mock "interviews" with actors playing the parts of combatants from either side. Although their words can be quite moving I'm afraid it still just looks like padding out the show. These are fairly minor defects, though. There are also a number of minor historical inaccuracies in the modern footage.

The series covers Boudicca's revolt against the Romans in 61AD, the Battle of Hastings in 1066, the battle for control of Wales in 1403, the Spanish Armada in 1588 (a particularly powerful episode), Naseby in 1645, the battle of the Boyne in Ireland in 1690 where two competing kings battled for the position of King of England, Culloden in Scotland in 1746, and finally the Battle of Britain against the Luftwaffe in 1940. It's a lot to cover but the series does it well and usually includes the politics leading up to the battle. Academics may prefer more detail but the purpose of the documentary is to arouse interest in the general public about their history. The series does this very well.





Blitz Street
Documentary
BBC / ABC DVD
Roadshow
Entertainment
R4 DVD



During the early years of World War II German bombers damaged or destroyed large amounts of London's more crowded residential suburbs. Although the bombing was initially against military targets like the docklands, there was considerable damage to the surrounding residential areas. Later this damage seems to have been deliberately encouraged in an attempt to break the British morale. We have all seen the photos of gutted buildings, rubble-choked streets and rescuers digging frantically to recover the living from under the wreckage of their terrace houses.

This documentary is one of those strange ones that explores one of the byways of history. The producers built two replica terrace houses using the materials and building techniques of the time then tested their reaction to various bombs and explosives that they would have encountered during the war. The results are fascinating. High speed cameras record the explosions so they can be analysed later. Various gauges and meters measure blast and sound pressure levels. We get a good explanation of the effects of a nearby bomb burst on humans. There is a point at which the sound pressure wave can disable a person's hearing and another point at which they will die. The blast could kill just as surely as the bomb explosion. On the high speed films we can often see the blast wave as it hits a building.

As the War turned against Germany Hitler again





became obsessed with the idea of bombing the British to surrender. The V1 and V2 were his answer, since the Luftwaffe had proved unable to break the British. The effect of the V weapons is examined. They were horrifying in the amount of damage they could do and the almost complete lack of protection from them. There is no doubt that these were intended purely to intimidate the civilian population since they could not be aimed precisely enough to only hit military targets. Yet against the constant night bombing, the civilians came through. Night after night they trooped into the shelters not knowing if their house would still be standing when they came out. There are many poignant stories from the survivors.

Presenter Tony Robinson as usual does a tremendous job explaining in clear terms just what each simulated bomb burst would have achieved in terms of death and destruction, but it is the high speed photography of buildings being destroyed that is truly horrifying. Nothing can prepare you for the sight of an entire slate roof buckling as it is blown upwards then slumping back into its original position.

The original four-episode series has been condensed to a single episode for this DVD, but doesn't seem to have lost anything by being abridged.



The Century of Flight
Documentary
BBC
2 Entertain
Roadshow
R4 DVD



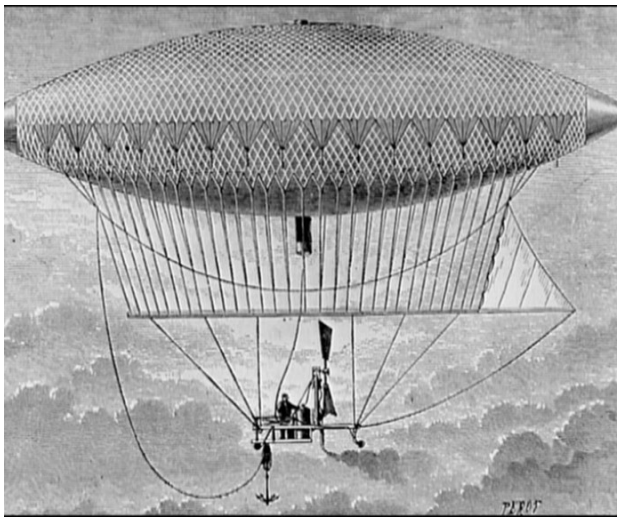
This seven-DVD set is possibly the most comprehensive documentary on the history of flight ever produced. There have been many aircraft and flight history documentaries produced but each usually confined itself to a small area of the field. Many worthy documentaries such as Wings of the Luftwaffe have concentrated on the aircraft themselves. Others like Wings Over The World have looked at the companies that produced aircraft. This set comprehensively covers the aircraft, the inventions, the pilots and wars, from hot air balloons up to the present day.

It concentrates a lot on the effects of warfare on the development of aircraft. This is fair, as a war spurred development like nothing else. We also get a look at tactics, strategic bombing, naval air power and carriers, and all the areas where aircraft play an important military role. In this respect the series' "big picture" gives a better look at the history rather than the aircraft. That is not to say that the aircraft themselves are ignored. Where an aircraft was a significant advance in technology it is given more attention and detail. Passenger aircraft are covered, both the successes like Boeing's 700 series and the failures like the De Haviland Comet. Freight aircraft do not miss out either. Their importance is well shown from polar exploration resupplies to developing a goldfield in New Guinea.



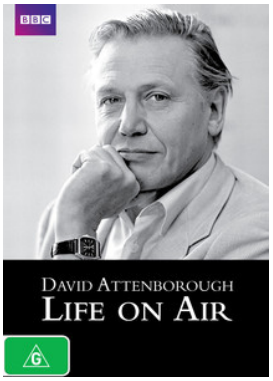
Some areas are singled out for close attention. The episode on helicopters is the best I have seen, as is the episode on the development of the jet engine. Parachutes, a rarely-covered area, are given a full episode. With a fifty minute episode to fill the producers were able to include much more detail without falling back on those old spacefillers, interviews and re-enactments. The producers also seem to have found many new sources of film clips. I thought I had seen most of what was available on other documentaries but this series contains a vast amount of new content. It is all relevant and well explained. Some clips appear in a number of episodes as they are relevant to many areas.

To anyone interested in the development of flight, I don't think you could do better than this series. Twenty six episodes packed with detail, good clear explanations and great film clips – this documentary does for flight history what The World At War did for World War II.





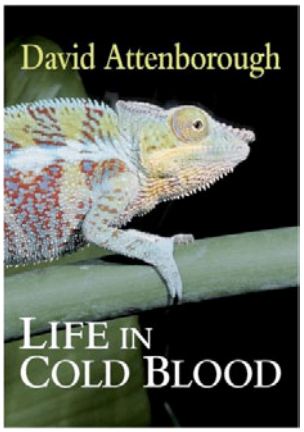
David Attenborough
Life on Air
BBC/ABC TV
R4 DVD

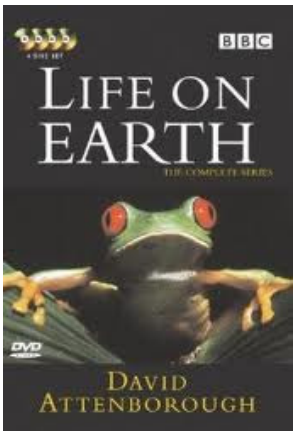


There are few TV presenters who are as popular, charismatic and well loved as David Attenborough. Yet Sir David has had an extraordinary professional history off screen too – which also provides an insight into the history of television. This intriguing program, presented by Michael Palin, reveals how David joined the BBC in 1952 and in the last 65 years has seen the BBC become world renowned across a number of genres, including, of course, the genre that he has come to epitomise - natural history.

Archive footage reminds us of some of his most unforgettable moments, revealing the extraordinary history of his life on air. While Attenborough's career includes many TV highlights such as growing BBC 2 from a new channel into something of great significance his major love has always been nature.

His *Life on Earth*, *Living Planet* and *Trials of Life* series (among many, many others) changed the face of nature television showing that ecology and the environment could be exciting and entertaining. His most ground-breaking show was *Life of Plants* which took a subject which nobody thought could be that interesting and turned it into a six hour spectacular which still sets the mark of camera work. The tale of how Ted Turner was asked to finance the show and at first was not impressed until his wife piped up





and said she liked flowers and that he should finance the show is amusing to say the least !

The repartee between Palin and Attenborough keeps the documentary going and the reminiscences and reflections from co-workers and friends give the program a nice personal feel.

Considering the career and achievements of Attenborough it is amazing how humble and down to earth he really is. Indeed at one stage he turned down promotions at the BBC so he could return to do what he loved, making nature documentaries.

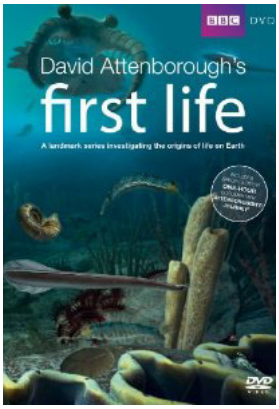
While Attenborough has tended to keep his personal opinions to himself in more recent times he has become a little strident considering the environmental crisis the world is now in. Recently programs on overpopulation and on the state of the oceans (made since this DVD was produced) have shown a new side to David Attenborough.

While this DVD is a little dated (1996) it still offers an excellent overview of Attenborough's careers with rare earlier footage.





First Life
David Attenborough
Roadshow
R4 DVD



Over his long career Sir David Attenborough has explored the living world in all its forms, animal, plant and bird life. He has created some of the most memorable documentary series every made and created a reputation for the highest calibre documentary. After working his way through modern life he realized he had never explored his dream subject, the origins of life. As he mentions during the program when he was a young man there was little knowledge of the earliest stages of evolution but now with the great advances in scientific knowledge he could make the final program in his Life series. Of course the very latest in CGI and computer special effects have helped as well.

Attenborough's journey begins in a forest near his childhood home in Leicester, where a fossil discovery transformed our understanding of the evolution of complex life. This fossil was the oldest every found and was a plant like creature which was actually an animal. It fed on nutrients from the water and lived at great depth. Attenborough then travels to Newfoundland and onwards through the Australian outback exploring the earliest forms of life, recreating them with astounding special effects

Through two hour long episodes Attenborough explores the origins of life including some of the most unusual creatures you will ever see. Many of these were evolutionary dead ends but illustrate the various stages of the natural selection process. This is a fascinating program with so many memorable sections including some truly amazing research on trilobites.

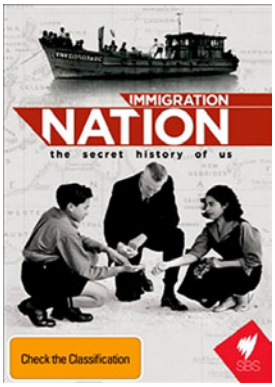


There is also an extra documentary. Attenborough's Journey which is a combination of a making of and a celebration of David Attenborough's life. Filmed over the course of a year, this special edition documentary is a remarkable portrait of the world's leading natural history broadcaster as he makes the landmark series that completes his journey into the story of life



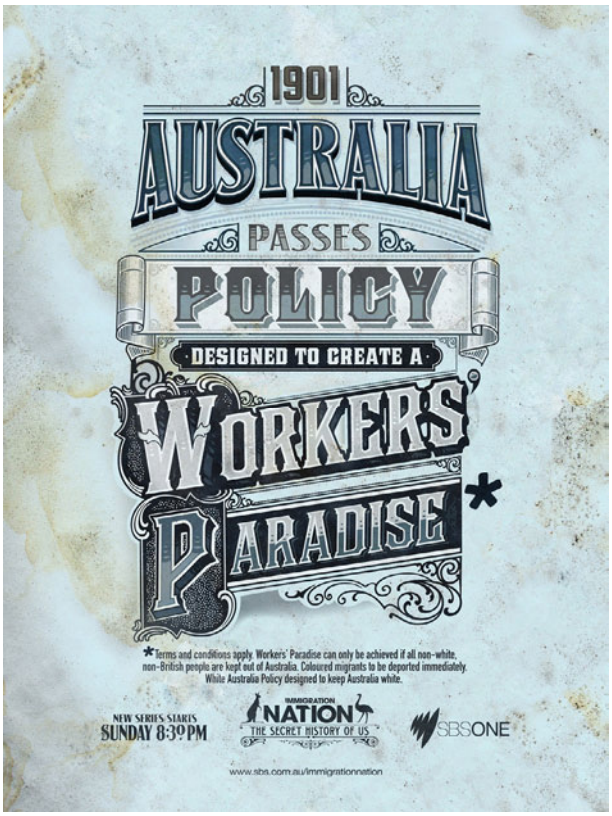


Immigration Nation
SBS
Madman
R4 DVD



One of the most shameful parts of Australian history is its treatment of non-white, non-British immigrants. This is the subject of the documentary – attitudes, politics and all. It is controversial but necessary and it will help Australians to understand how the country started. Japan is sometimes criticised for not telling its students the truth about World War II – immigration policy seems to have been played down in Australia for probably the same reasons.

The White Australia policy was made law at Federation, although it was called the Immigration Act. Its purpose was to make Australia a whites-only country along the British model. There seems no valid reason for this policy at the time, simply peoples' prejudices against anyone different. I have heard a theory that British were preferred because their immigrants were from the lower classes and knew their place, posing no threat to the local "aristocracy". It used the same justifications as slavery in an earlier century and was just as hypocritical. Non-British were actually called "the servile races". The documentary would have been better if it had included the reasons for these attitudes.




onies MINISTER FIRM THIS FAMILY MUST LEAVE PREMIER

MRS ANNIE O'KEEFE, of Bonbeach, and six of her eight children.

INDONESIAN WOMAN AND 8 CHILDREN MUST GO, SAYS MR CALWELL

CANBERRA, Fri: Mrs Annie O'Keefe, of Stenfield ave Bonbeach, Indo-

The problem was that Australia already had a large number on non-whites. There were Chinese from the gold mining days, Japanese pearlers, Pacific Islanders (known as Kanakas) working in the canefields and, of course, the troublesome Aborigines who simply refused to die out fast enough. The new policy required



Arthur Caldwell





First Boat from Vietnam

that these people be deported and refused re-entry. The aborigines were not regarded as a problem as their numbers were falling and the problem would eventually just go away. The policy was, in fact, what we now call “ethnic cleansing”. This policy was to be applied particularly to Asians. To enter the country as an immigrant the Government introduced the Dictation Test. Immigrants had to be able to write down accurately a 50-word dictation. If they showed aptitude the language could be changed to any language the Immigration Officer selected. The Government’s hypocrisy was clearly evident to them as they hid the White Australia policy behind this ludicrous test. Families like the Chinese O”Hoys were forcibly broken up when non-complying members were sent back to their country of origin.

After World War I the policy was continued. Australia desperately needed men and women to develop the nation, but they would have to be British. The British government took the opportunity to unload their lower classes and unemployed onto Australia with lies about ready-made farms and great opportunities. Meanwhile at the post-war conferences the Japanese were repeatedly snubbed and developed a dislike for Australia and its racist policy.

After World War II the situation changed. Arthur Calwell, deputy leader of the Labour Party and a dedicated White Australia man, knew Australia had to “populate or perish”. No matter how they tried they could not get enough suitable British immigrants. Calwell, a canny politician, knew Australians would not accept opening the floodgates to just any immigrant. He sent staff to the Displaced Persons camps throughout Europe signing up immigrants. Although not British they were at least white. For the first boat he selected the most attractive men and women and gave them great media coverage. The public fell for it. The new buzzword was “assimilation”. There were still no Asians allowed, though. The deportations continued. One of the saddest was the case of 5 year old Nancy Prasad. She was being looked after by her naturalised brother but the Dept of Immigration insisted that she be deported back to Fiji as she didn’t have Australian citizenship. A care-



Deporting Chinese



Kanakas (Qld)



Al Grassby

fully organised publicity stunt brought the deportation policy to the notice of the public via the new medium of TV and many Australians started to wonder if this inhumane policy was necessary.

The situation changed again during the Vietnam war. Eighteen year olds were being sent off to kill people although they were still regarded as too immature to vote. The rising feeling against the war forced the Government to act. They gave the young people the right to vote and at the next election the ungrateful little bastards voted them out of office. The incoming Labour government promised to ease the White Australia policy but Prime Minister Gough Whitlam was slow to act, feeling that immigrants from Asia may vote against his government. Then the boat people started to arrive.

Refugees from Vietnam made their way through storms and pirates to Australia. Many were in a piteous state when they arrived and public opinion continued to change. After all, these people



Nancy Prasad Age 5



had been fighting alongside out troops in Vietnam. Surely we owed them something? The last vestiges of support for the White Australia policy now seemed to be entrenched mostly in the elderly, who could parrot the catchphrases used to justify the policy without having to think too hard about it. The politicians, however, were getting younger and their influence was growing.

When the Labour party was kicked out of government the case of Nancy Prasad was raised to the new Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser. Anxious to establish a good public image and to claim his place in history, Fraser to his credit immediately reversed the earlier decision and invited Nancy back to Australia. This effectively marked the end of the White Australia policy but the old attitudes died hard.

Australia is now one of the most multiracial countries in the world. Each new ethnic group has had its problems settling in but has eventually become Australian but kept the traditions of its own culture. If nothing else our cuisine has improved dramatically. Now a new group of refugees is arriving from Afghanistan and Iran. Australia is still settling refugees from wartorn African nations. The documentary is timely because the same old arguments against ethnic immigration are being trotted out again. Some groups bring their problems with them and it may take a generation or two to settle them down. I would like to have seen these covered in the documentary, as they are the cause of much of the opposition to immigration. Arthur Calwell's point still stands, though – we must populate or perish. The immigrants are the only answer.

I was a Teenage Feminist
Trixie Films

"This film is evidence that feminism - whether second wave, third wave or no wave - hasn't ceased to be a vital, many-hued movement with something to offer women of any age." -***Bitch Magazine***

I was a Teenage Feminist is a personal journey into a powerful, political movement that once sparked passionate response and social revolution, but now routinely evokes discomfort, indifference and even contempt. When we look at the growing influence of the religious right and conservative politics it becomes all too obvious why women's issues need to be once again on the agenda.

Today so many people view feminism as a movement of the past and yet so many significant concerns ranging from equal pay for woman to reproductive rights remain unresolved. While many people try to negate feminism by reducing it to an "abortion" only movement, in reality it is a wide movement with many perspectives and differing values which is held together by a common view of equality for both sexes.

Armed with a video camera, an inquiring mind, and an irreverent sense of humor, filmmaker Therese Shechter crisscrosses both the continent in the hope of reconnecting to the power and sense of purpose that feminism gave her as a teenager in the 1970s. She has a very down to earth approach, an endearing honesty and a willingness to follow an idea to wherever it goes, she is more than willing to explore her own identity along the way.

As Therese searches for her place in the feminist movement and tries to come to terms with her identity as a modern woman, she asks some fundamental questions: How did feminism lose its voice? Does it even exist today and for that matter, what is feminism?

Therese interviews a view of characters including a stay at home mum who is not only a radical feminist but a political activist, a grrl rock music promoter, the editors of Bust magazine and lots more.

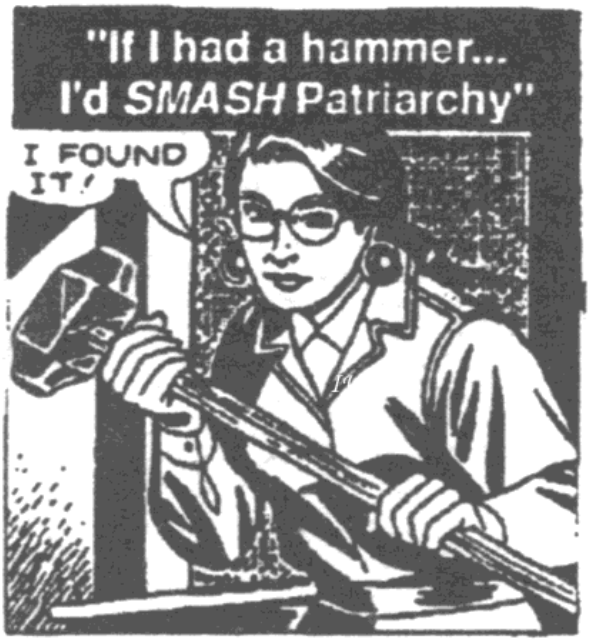
There is Vinnie, a liberated young man working to take menstruation out of the closet and promotes tampon cases and a number of older feminist figures who have spent their live fighting for women's rights. She also explores Third Wave feminism and the relationship between feminism and LBGT issues.



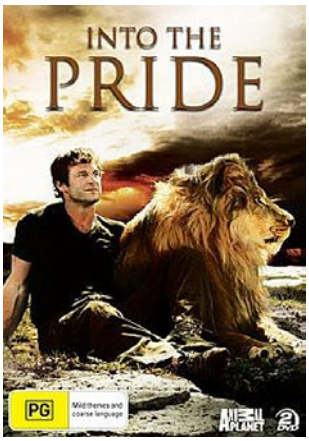
This is a superbly made documentary interspersed with fun clips from 1950's moral education films. There is an excellent overview of women's rights throughout history with some nifty animations and a good balance between the personal journey of the filmmakers, interviews and informative content.

With Therese's witty, honest narration, a vibrant cast of thought-provoking characters, a great sense of humour and a very cool soundtrack featuring Ani DiFranco, Gina Young, MoxieStarpark, the classic Free to Be...You and Me and the legendary Helen Reddy, I was a Teenage Feminist redefines the F-word for a new generation.

Web: http://www.trixiefilms.com/teenfem/



Into The Pride
Nature Documentary
Discovery Channel / Magna Home Entertainment
R4 DVD



Erindi is a huge game park in Namibia. It depends on tourism to keep going. When a group of rogue lions was relocated into the park the trouble started. The pride of lions had a fear of humans resulting from being hunted and having their natural rangelands enclosed for farming. They had turned to killing cattle to replace the animals no longer available to them. Erindi was their last chance and they were proving antisocial even there. They had no tolerance of tourists and sooner or later a visitor would be killed. This would be detrimental to the park (and the tourist). Somehow they had to be not so much tamed as quieted and taught not to fear humans in their new environment. The park owners turned to big cat specialist Dave Salmoni.

Normally I can't stand idiots like Bear Grylls who put themselves in danger, I suspect for the ego trip. Salmoni could so easily be one of these showmen but he has a somewhat more rational approach that I found more interesting. He decided that if one man could live around the cats for a while and gradually be accepted on their terms they might be more willing to accept groups of tourists as something more than a meal. Salmoni knew the cats were dangerous



so his plan was to be cautious and not threatening. In spite of this he still seems to have gone in a little unprepared. Different cats have different personalities and a clear plan could not be worked out until he worked out their personalities.

His first job was to find out about the animals. He gave them names, a habit I hate but which helps with identification throughout the series. The alpha male he named Brutus. His smaller brother was Otis.







The two females were Cleopatra (the dominant female) and Winnie. Both females had a pair of cubs.

Brutus turned out to be the easiest to win over. A bit of token growling and a half-hearted charge seemed to convince him that Dave was not a competitor and they came to tolerate each other. Cleopatra, however, was a different matter. She was aggressive and appeared to hate Dave on sight. She would move between him and the cubs. Charges were frequent. As the lead hunter she had probably been the most at risk from farmers and was therefore the most intolerant. The others didn't seem to care much one way or the other and tolerated Dave as he gradually approached closer. A quick growl would tell him he had come close enough and he learnt the signals quickly.



He won the confidence of the cubs by giving them a large ball to play with, and one of his shirts that smelled of lion and heaven knows what else. They soon associated him with lion smell and seemed quite fearless around him. Cleo, however, was not won over by this approach.

Dave sometimes goes off into an introspective mood where he describes his feelings of frustration. He only had six months to settle the lions or they would be put down as dangerous. He takes the assignment very personally and he obviously loves the big cats. He is almost in tears when his aging friend Brutus is beaten in a fight for dominance by Otis. He knows Brutus is dying and will probably not live much longer.

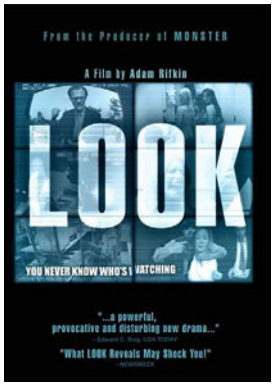
The documentary is an insight into the cats' mentality. I have to put it down as a worthy project because the traditional human instinct is kill a big animal before it kills you. Dave has shown what a bit if understanding can do. On both sides. If we are to see the big cats continue a life in the wild this understanding will be needed..







Look
Anchor Bay Entertainment / Starz
R4 DVD



We are assured in the film that there are over 30 million surveillance cameras in the U.S. and that each person will be filmed around 200 times per day. This film shows some of the events picked up by the cameras but it also suggests that in many cases nothing will result. This begs the question – "do we need so many cameras if they are unattended or ignored?"

From the camera's viewpoint we see a set of events ranging from harassment in the workplace to a sleazy manager fondling a shop assistant. We see child abduction, shoplifting, murder and a teacher having sex with an underage student through the eye of the ever-present camera.

At first unrelated, some of these incidents become intertwined further into the story. Most are simply deadends and nothing will come of them. The only ones who seem to make use of the cameras are the Police and they can only act when a crime is committed. For the rest, they may as well not be there. From what we see in the film the cameras certainly don't do anything to stop crime, in fact many people carry on their antisocial acts almost with contempt for surveillance.

The film was supposedly shot only on surveillance cameras, but it soon becomes obvious that this is not so as in some scenes the camera position keeps changing and often the quality is a bit high. Nevertheless it is an interesting way to show a slice of the seedy life and it does not detract from the film.

Director Adam Rivkin has given us a film that is a cross between a drama and a documentary. He raises some issues of privacy that sit quietly in the background but make us think – how much surveillance is necessary before a person's privacy is invaded versus how much information should we have in case of emergency?





Mugabe and the White African
Documentary
First Run Features
R1 DVD



President Robert Mugabe's land reform has evicted 4000 white farmers in Zimbabwe. In too many cases the land was given to political friends, High Court judges and Army members, not to those who knew anything about farming and could keep the land productive. Thousands are now starving. The white farmers have largely been replaced with black landowners and the bulk of the population is worse off – no farming jobs to be had and no idea how to manage a farm anyway.

The new owners will often seize all the farm equipment and dismantle it for parts. If you don't know anything about farming this is often more lucrative. The contents of the houses will simply be looted or destroyed.

Historically the seizure of large landowners' properties and their breakup into smaller units has been hailed as a step forward for democracy. In practice these schemes have often failed as the new landowners either didn't know how to farm their land or didn't have enough land to be productive. One such scheme that comes to mind was the Soldier Settlers Scheme of post-World War I Australia, where land for small farms was taken from the large pastoral holdings. In most cases the farms went broke and were bought up again by the big landowners.

In Zimbabwe most farms have been kept intact but given to people with political influence and



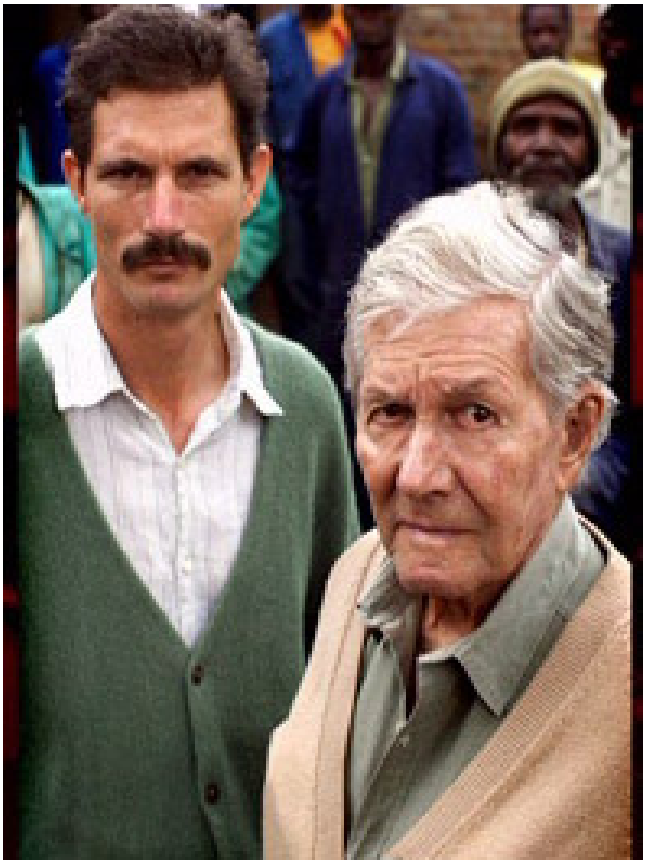


little or no farming experience. It was once described as "the bread bowl of Africa" but Zimbabwe is now a net importer of food. Inflation is rampant. The little village farms that remain cannot support the population of the cities, and even these people are being chased away from their villages. Mugabe still proceeds with his irrational anti-European campaign in the name of land reform, though, and reserves a special hatred for the British. He has bought his political power with the promise of land for all and is now almost impossible to dislodge. Is this really "land reform"?

The documentary follows the story of Mike Campbell, one of the few remaining white farmers. He is now forced to carry a gun when away from the farmhouse. In the face of continued harassment and intimidation he has taken Mugabe to the Supreme Court. He is using as his grounds racial discrimination. With an election looming Mugabe must be beaten in court, for another electoral win would make him unassailable. The Campbells are due for forcible eviction within a week. His wife retreats into that old standby "we must trust God", who doesn't appear to be listening. The rest of the family are a little more practical but still relatively powerless.

Five hundred people, black and white, live on the Campbell farm. Many have been with him since the early days when the farm was first started. Many have learned farming trades like tractor driving. Without Campbell, these people will be unemployed and their future will be bleak. Campbell's farm has been officially confiscated by the government and Campbell has been prosecuted for continuing to live in his house of his farm. It all depends on the court case against Mugabe.

Then comes a last-minute blow. With the elec-



tion close the Court postpones the case. They do at least instruct the government not to take eviction action until after the case. On their return to the farm, though, the Campbells find the son of a government minister about to take over possession of "his" house. They win the argument but they know he will be back supported by the "militia", a bunch of armed government-sponsored thugs. Following the savage beating of Campbell, his son-in-law and daughter they pack what they can and prepare to move (temporarily, they hope) to Namibia where they arrive nine days later.

On the day of the court hearing the case is again held over.

The election draws closer and Mugabe continues with his irrational ranting against the English. This is his main election policy, to vilify the British even though they have no influence or involvement in Zimbabwe. It is highly reminiscent of the Nazi campaign against the Jews during World War II. So is the violence and intimidation against the British. Mugabe, of course, wins the election as he is the only candidate.

The case finally resumes with Campbell's son-in-law still in a wheelchair. Mugabe's lawyers ask for a further extension but surprisingly the Court refuses another deferment. The defence team then walked out of the Court to "receive instructions from the government" in defiance of the court. Finally four months later the Court delivers its findings.

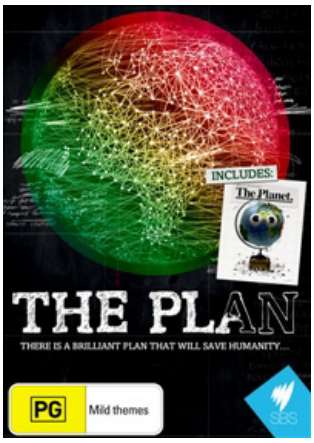
Part of the problems of Zimbabwe must be laid at the feet of the white landowners themselves. For generations the native people have been the farm labourers, not the managers or agronomists or even farm mechanics that the country now needs. The whites have seen no reason to change this.

Although the people of Zimbabwe are still suffering under Mugabe's increasingly dictatorial rule, they also must accept part of the blame for what their country has become. The have allowed their democracy to die in spite of paying the price. They continued to vote for Mugabe long enough for him to consolidate his power. Now they are in desperate poverty and only international intervention can save the country. This point is not made in the documentary, perhaps because it isn't fashionable to point the finger at victims and say "but you let this happen". Basically, just as George W Bush's "weapons of mass destruction" ploy managed to hoodwink Americans into going to war, Mugabe has used "evil British landowners" and the people of Zimbabwe fell for it. I would have been interested to see how this came about, but the Question and Answer section in the Extras explains that it was hard to interview black Zimbabweans because of their fear of being identified.

The documentary is a good example of the rise of dictatorship allowed by the gullibility of the voters. It is a grim lesson in that it cannot offer answers to the problems of Zimbabwe.



The Planet and The Plan
Madman
R4 DVD



"The planet is threatened with destruction. Time is short but we still have a choice. Whether we like it or not we are heading towards a profound change.

The climate, population growth, species extinction, resource consumption etc are just running wild. We can deal with it and produce the change we want or we can let that change force itself upon us.

More and more people are becoming aware of these challenges and engage in different plans and initiatives in order to drive this development forward. In The Plan we'll get to know some of these people. Their stories, their thoughts, ideas and plans seem to be a part of something bigger. If all this initiative, creativity and optimism could be coordinated it might be possible to create a global movement powerful enough to change the world before it's too late."

This documentary does nothing to further the cause of changing our impact on the planet, as far as I could see. It is a disjointed series of interviews purporting to show how individuals are trying, in their own way, to make small changes.

There is little actual history but in an opening



clip of the Copenhagen 2009 Conference on Climate Change the comment is made that "The great leaders have flown in as if they are coming in to shape the future and they've really done nothing." This was quite true. If anything Copenhagen highlighted the need for Government action, especially on industry, but they will respond only to public pressure from the people who elect them. That such rapid industrial change is possible is highlighted by Roosevelt's activation of the U.S. auto industry to produce planes and guns during WWII. He did this simply by banning the sale of private cars, forcing the switch of industry to a wartime footing. It CAN be done.

Unfortunately many of the people interviewed for the documentary are unlikely to change that public opinion.







"*There are a lot of very abstract, almost spiritual, notions about what needs to be happening now."*

How will a Dutch "kinetic sculptor" who makes windpowered sculpture "animals" affect peoples' opinions on climate change and generate public pressure? I could see no connection at all with the documentary.

Some examples given have been covered to exhaustion before. The destruction of native forests for monoculture crops like sugar, this time in Uganda rather than the Amazon basin, has been well aired. A Ugandan woman politician was vocal in her demands that the clearing of the Mabira forest stop, and was arrested and imprisoned for her "crime". In an ensuing riot four people were killed. How can you put public pressure on a government when they have a vested interest in the sugar company that will benefit most from the clearing?



Chris Darwin has bought a reserve in outback Australia that he monitors for a number of rare species. In his own way he is trying to preserve endangered species and even reforest some of the sterile areas in cities. It is a praiseworthy endeavour but is he doomed to failure? If the continent is drying out, as predictions indicate, will the plants die off anyway?

This seems to be the problem with many of these well-meaning individuals. In their own way and in their own little area they are doing their best but they may fail unless the bigger picture can be changed. Dangling banners from the roof of the British Parliament may be spectacular but does it really influence peoples' opinions?

Tony Blair, then the Prime Minster, said that such matters will be decided on the floor of Parliament, not on the roof. The same could probably be said of all the marches, demonstrations and placard-waving. Rarely do they lead to significant change.

The documentary doesn't really address the issue of the U.S., one of the biggest causes of the problem. How do you apply "people pressure" to a government that is so much in the pockets of industrialists?

It covers wildlife problems and has the usual heroic raiders of the Sea Shepherd organisation intercepting Japanese whaling ships and the usual dreadful pictures of baby seals being clubbed. Very emotional, but these bits and pieces serve to fragment the DVD, leaving the viewer to wonder what it is really all about. The entire documentary has a rather disjointed feel and whatever message it carries is lost.

The documentary was disappointing in that it offered little that was new and the people who were interviewed seemed destined to have little impact anyway. It urges people to network over the Internet and spread their ideas, but doesn't really explain how this will help. Rather than being a documentary on individual impacts on climate change I feel it soon degenerated into a tutorial on How NOT To Make A Climate Change Doco. This is a pity as there were the glimmerings of some good ideas there.

River Monsters
Magna Home Entertainment
R4 DVD



River Monsters is a television series released by Animal Planet and hosted by Jeremy Wade, biologist and extreme Angler. It has proved to be one of the most successful series on Animal Planet and a third series is in production. While, at first, glance the presentation seems sensationalist, when you get behind the heavily marketed presentation the content is truly astounding. It brings together a range of different genres into each episode forensics, historical study, biology, medicine and, of course, fishing. There are eight episodes in each series, 45 minutes each in length.

Episodes in the first series include:

Piranha, Catfish, Alligator Gar, European Maneater, Amazon Assassins, Amazon Flesheaters and Freshwater Shark (the final episode having a lot of Australian content).

To give an example of the content let's look at Amazon Flesheaters, the story opens with a tale about a catfish found with a man lodged in its mouth. Wade investigates the story and finds out about the unique nature of Amazonian Catfish which literally includes a myriad of forms. He looks at the Piraíba catfish which while not having teeth is able to swallow any number of animals whole even leading to its own demise if it chooses a victim too large. He even finds one with another Catfish of the same size lodged in its mouth !

He then begins to examine other Catfish which are even more terrifying. The Candiru is a small

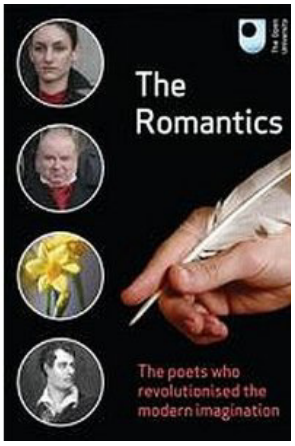




Catfish which is a parasite, it smells the urea of fish and enters them living off their blood. In some cases it can mistake a human for a fish smelling the urea of someone urinating and swimming up their penis. Wade examines this tale to see if it is urban legend, he finds a case which cannot be disputed interviewing the victim, the urologist and even finding the Candiru kept as a specimen in a local museum. He provides full medical information including X-Rays and more to document the case. Creepy stuff ! He then examines the Candiru-Acù which is a larger and perhaps even more deadly version of the Candiru. It has a sharp toothed mouth and bodies are regularly found without internal organs as these fish quickly eat into the flesh and then devour the body inside out leaving bullet link holes on the skin from which they have entered. He shows how this fish eats by placing large fish into the water and then dragging them out finding them without any internal organs or flesh left within a very short time. He also visits a local morgue and sees exactly what these fish can do to living humans who have fallen into the water, or been sick or drunk and unable to escape the fish in time. Wade then returns to the original big catfish he was after and catches one showing us just how big they can grow.

I find Wade an impressive host, while certainly a character; he shows immense respect for the animals he discusses, letting them go after he has caught them. He offers us lots of background information on each fish and combines academic knowledge with hands on experience in the field. This is a riveting series which will keep you fascinating every episode, it will also introduce you to some of the truly strangest fish on the planet !

The Romantics
BBC Series
R2
DVD



The Romantics is a somewhat eccentric and unusual series narrated by Peter Ackroyd exploring the development of the movement in art, literature and poetry known as Romanticism.

It is presented over three hour long episodes which offer a comprehensive background to the development of the various aspects of the movement and the context in which it evolved.

The focus is on the Romantic poets and covers William Blake, Lord Byron, John Clare, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Percy Shelley and William Wordsworth. Each episode is presented using recreations of key events, actors playing the various figures and readings from key words of poetry.

It is presented using the original locations (even when they have been changed or built over), carefully chosen special effects and an intriguing narration which is informative but entertaining.

It is a fascinating and challenging series as it traces the movement from Rousseau and the ideals of the French Revolution, through the period of terror and its excesses to the development of the concept of individual freedom and democracy as expressed through the poets. It explores the ideals at the heart of American democracy as well as the Romantics.



William Blake

In the final episode Ackroyd explores a new generation of Romantics who moving away from religion and god find a new faith in poetry. As science reduced man to a machine through the study of medicine and anatomy, Romanticism rebelled and saw man as potentially divine in his own right. Shelley and Bryon applied this new approach in forging their own poetic worlds as well as their own new social and sexual mores which scandalised the society around them. Indeed Byron became a literal outcast due to his way of living and thinking, while Shelly's work on atheism got him expelled from Oxford and started his new quest for a different paradigm of the world.



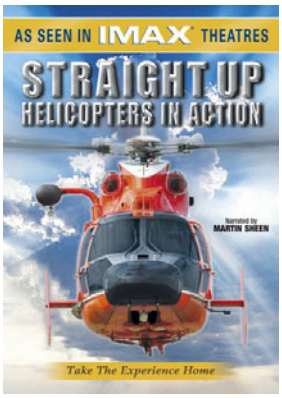
There are some excellent actors playing the major roles Dudley Sutton as William Blake, Joseph Millson ad Lord Byron, Rafe Spall as John Clare, Martin Savage as Colerige, Nicholas Shaw as Keats, Blake Ritson as Shelley and David Threlfall as Wordsworth

Throughout this remarkable series we come to appreciate the unique changes brought about in the 19th century which literally created the perceptions we have of the world today.





Straight Up:
Helicopters In Action
Documentary
Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum
Vista Point Entertainment
Blu Ray
Region A



The DVD has been converted from the large screen Imax format and the tremendous quality is noticeable. The film features helicopters in a range of scenarios, some quite unexpected. The range shows the helicopter in detail as one of the most versatile aircraft ever designed.

The episodes show a sea rescue, smuggling interdiction, repair of high voltage power lines, a mountain rescue, humanitarian activities in Sierra Leone, insertion of military in enemy territory and saving a rhinoceros. Some of the footage looks like it may have been staged but the majority looks like genuine, helicopters-at-work footage. I was particularly impressed by the use of helicopters to place men on power lines to check their condition. The work is explained in detail and the worker concerned seems cautious but unconcerned by it, but I suspect there are few people who would take on such a job. As for the risk of the helicopter rotors fouling the power lines, it takes a skilled and cool-headed pilot to handle such a scenario.

The work is often dramatic but greatly unappreciated. The DVD highlights the humanitarian work, while constant news exposure seems to concentrate on the military uses.

In the extras there is an interesting section on how the Imax camera was mounted to helicopters. The technical work required to mount the camera and get the footage is tremendous. The film is a well-earned tribute to the helicopter and the men who pilot them.





Strange Birds In Paradise
Documentary
Antidote Films
Pinnacle Films
R4 DVD



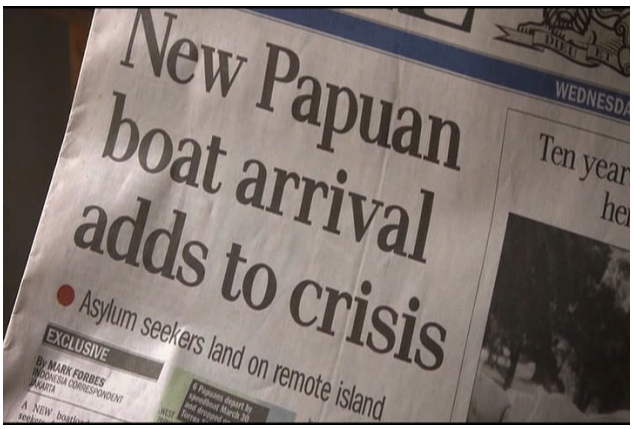
I am unsure what Australian filmmaker Charlie Hill-Smith was trying to do when he made this film. There is a strong theme about the repressive Indonesian regime in West Papua, a rambling theme about the making of a disk of Papuan music, and a strange idea of Charlie's in which he sees himself as the modern version of a travelling spirit from an Indonesian legend. The three themes have little connection with each other, although he does try to link the music and the freedom fighters in a statement "Art is a weapon and culture is life, as long as they can sing they will prevail." Really? Against a modern well armed military? We also get altogether too much of his rather crude animated drawings.

It is as a documentary of Indonesian occupation that his film assumes importance. After East Timor got its independence the plight of the West Papuans was forgotten and it is timely for this film to remind us of the abuses taking place. East Timor was being looted of its resources by powerful generals in the Indonesian military. Now they have been chased out of East Timor they have transferred their attention to West Papua.

The big Freeport gold mine is owned by an exgeneral, as are many of the huge logging countries that are illegally logging the Papuan rainforests. Freedom fighter groups have sprung up to resist the Indonesians and there has often been killing and brutality. Traditional protest marches, that classic way to take action and achieve nothing, have been broken up brutally. Resistance leaders have been arrested or killed. Villages have been burned and their occupants turned into refugees.

Although Charlie has a good knowledge of Indonesian history based on his many years there, he makes some statements that need further explanation. Charlie talks of 240 "cultures" in West Papua. Does he mean 240 villages? Otherwise it's a lot of cultures for a small area to support. Why does he not mention that West Papua was occupied after the War on the advice of an American official? It seems the Indonesians may not have wanted this Dutch colonial remnant before this. What does the CD and the following concert aim to prove?







Are the Papuan refugees trying to raise sympathy for their cause, or raise money for guns? Their music at least is quite pleasant and carries a lot of feeling.

The documentary has a number of irrelevant areas that serve to fragment its themes, such as Charlie's connection with the wandering spirit. We are shown part of the legend using shadow puppets, an Indonesian form of entertainment. This theme seems to be a bit self-indulgent and adds nothing to the documentary. Much of the film shot in Papua is more like a tourist promotion, with no connection with the occupation story. The history is mostly carried by old news clips from TV crews.

Overall I thought the film was a worthwhile piece on the occupation. Strictly, since West Papua is legally a part of Indonesia we shouldn't even call it an occupation but there seems no doubt that the native people are suffering at the hands of "their" country.

If Charlie had only edited out some of the other less relevant themes he would have produced a good documentary on a subject that deserves to be brought to the world's attention.



This Way of Life
Antidote Films
Pinnacle Films
R4 DVD

This documentary is unusual in that it has no obvious message to get across, no point to make and no apparent plot. It is simply four years in the life of a New Zealand Maori family. We travel with them through their troubles, joys and sad moments. We see how well their simple lifestyle works and how it affects their large family of kids.

Peter Karena, while not Maori-born, has been accepted by the Maori community. He married Colleen, a surprisingly mentally strong woman who runs the family. They have five kids, although the number increases during the time









the film was made. Peter makes a living raising and breaking horses in the nearby Ruahine mountains. He also hunts deer for venison and makes a further living as a carpenter and running occasional tourist horse treks along the beach, a business that is growing.

Peter and Colleen's kids are growing up around the horses and are completely unafraid of them. Daughter Aurora thinks nothing of mounting a huge stallion and riding him bareback. The kids are not "ferals", they go to school regularly and one is happy that the school teaches foreign languages. They are simply happy, healthy country kids growing up in a lifestyle that city kids would find hard to adapt to. They are resourceful and self confident. Both parents love their kids and believe they are building a future for them.

Peter is surprisingly philosophical about it and has obviously decided that this is the best way to bring them up. He is a natural on camera and is happy to voice his opinions, which carry a lot of common sense. It seems to be working. Colleen is always more reserved though the film but seems to agree with her husband.

They have one major problem. His mother remarried later in life and Peter's malevolent stepfather seems to be out to make Peter's life as hard as possible. He appears to have always had problems with Peter's existence and refers to him only as "my wife's son". When the film opens the family has just been told that Peter's stepfather has sold their house that seven generations of the family have lived in. There may be legal problems over the sale because Peter has been paying the mortgage on behalf of his stepfather, but he still has to get out. His stepfather has even lodged a complaint against him for trespass, even though Peter is paying the mortgage as rent. Peter notes to one of the policemen sent to keep order that his stepfather is becoming known for shonky deals in the community. His hatred saddens Peter who seems to accept that they will never be reconciled. One night, with most of their stuff moved out, the house mysteriously catches fire. All the family photos and other memorabilia are lost. It is a huge blow to Colleen to whom family is very important. They move out and set up a







small temporary camp with a caravan, a tent and Peter's horses.

They get themselves a house again when Colleen's mother lets them use a huge shed on her property. Their new home is large and comfortable, but Peter knows that true security for his family can only come if they own their own property.

We follow Peter on a trip into the mountains where he rounds up horses for sale and shoots a pig and a deer for food. Later when he goes back up the mountain to pick up the horses his eldest son comes with him. The trip is dangerous but this is just part of the lifestyle. When they reach the mountain hut all their horses have been stolen. Although Peter has his suspicions about the thief he never voices them. He just goes back to work combing the mountains for more horses.

Colleen, who was pregnant, has lost the baby but now has another one on the way.



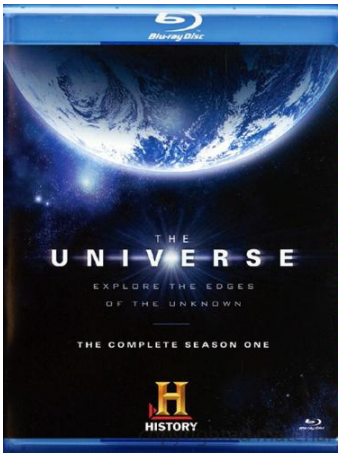


Peter's father for no apparent reason has had the old house demolished (after it caught fire the sale fell through) and is hostile to the filmmakers. His deep and irrational dislike for Peter comes out ever stronger – every success Peter has seems to be a personal insult to him. He talks of demolishing the house as "there are lessons that some people have to learn". He is now spreading rumours around town that Peter's horses and business are actually his. Despite all these setbacks we get to see the magic day when Peter and Colleen manage to finally put down a deposit on their new home. It is a proud moment for them.

It is not a "heart-warming" story in the traditional style. These are real people living real lives under difficult conditions. Their philosophy, words and actions give you a deep respect for them. The country they live in is beautiful but harsh yet somehow encourages an inner strength in the parents and the kids. Lucky kids. As an example of how some people handle life, this film should not be missed.



The Universe
Season One
Blu Ray
Roadshow
Region B



The Universe is one of the most daring series on the nature of the universe ever made. Made by the History Channel in the United States for Cable T.V, it is exhaustive in content having five series so far each with episodes of 45 minutes each presented on three Blu Ray discs, the series are 13 episodes extra but a bonus documentary. It uses the latest in CGI and special effects coupled with down to earth experiments and explanations.

There are a wide range of experts who challenge you to “think up” to their level rather than reducing the subject matter to a populist level. Each episode is truly packed with information and it is surprising just how much you can learn from each program without feeling overloaded. At times the presentation can be a little “popularized” with attention grabbing titles and loud intro voice overs but these distract little from the overall quality of the series. Some of the content does occasionally seem repetitive but this is probably hard to avoid when exploring subjects in a thematic manner. At the same time new details are given or new interviews are included when covering the same ground so it does seem justified.

This is one of the very best series on astronomy, space and the universe I have very seen and highly recommend it.





The Universe Season One Episode Guide

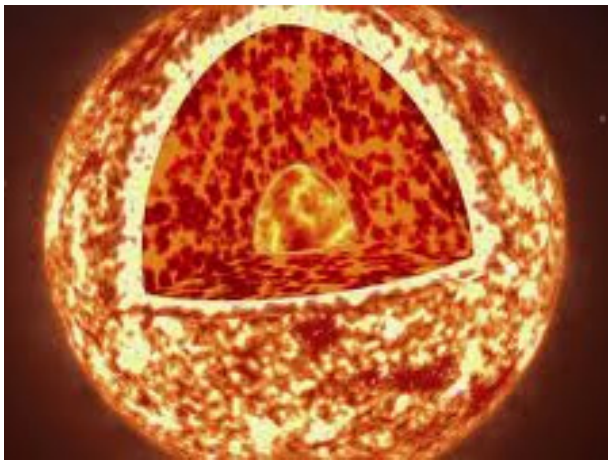
Episode 1 offers amazing insights into the nature of the sun from the fact that it is known as a yellow dwarf star to the reality that it will die out in five billion years. We come to understand how the sun works, it various layers and about solar storms. The presentation is easy to follow but not simplistic and personally I came away with an incredible respect for that bright ball in the sky we so often take for granted.

Episode 2 Mars extensively covers the red planet, discussing the history of its discovery and strange ideas about its possible inhabitants from the canals of Mars to Orson Wells’ War of the Worlds. There is lots of fascinating information on the once watery surface of Mars and what reduced it to its present condition.

Episode 3 End of the Earth is a true apocalyptic nightmare covering all manner of possible catastrophes from space including meteors, gamma rays bursts and the big rip where the universe continues to expand until it literally tears itself apart.







Episode 4 covers Jupiter and offers a fascinating examination of its constitution as well as coverage its various moons.

Episode 5 is on the Moon examining everything from its effects on the tides to the various theories about its origin.

Episode 6 Spaceship earth explores the history of earth, its development and various theories about its end.

Episode 7 explores the inner planets of Mercury and Venus.

Episode 8 focuses on Saturn and its rings, its forty eight named moons and its most unique moon Titan.

Episode 9 is a change of pace and looks outside our universe at the nature of galaxies, the big bang, black holes, dark matter and dark energy. It is illustrated with some truly astounding footage.

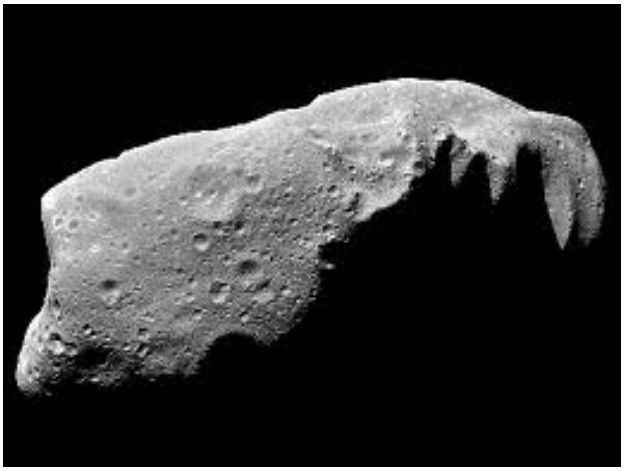
Episode 10 explores the birth and death of a star and looks at a bewildering arrange of unusual subjects from the nature of white dwarves to neutron stars.

Episode 11 moves back to the planets and explores Neptune, Uranus and the controversy regarding the now demoted Pluto.

Episode 12 covers the most dangerous places in the universe and did tend to repeat material covered elsewhere.

Episode 13 explored the search for life in the universe and as fascinating, looking at what sort of life we may find and where as well as covering the SETI program.

The final doco Beyond the Big Bang on this first set was a 90 minute special covering the history of astronomy, it is quite exceptional, beautifully made and explores both the science and the personalities behind what makes up astronomy today. From Copernicus to Einstein, Solid Slate theory to the Big Bang, this is a superb overview.





Peacock Films

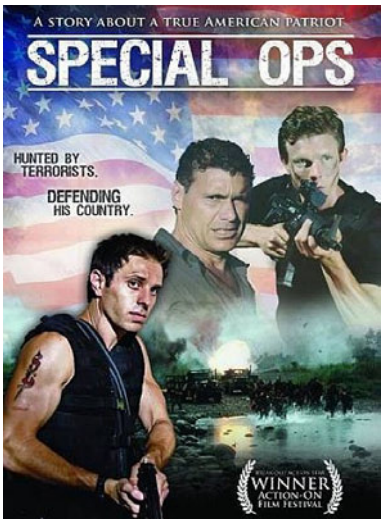
Here at Synergy we see a lot of independent films from young directors. We often wonder what they could have done with a little more money for their films. It takes a while for a director or producer to come up with a blockbuster, and a lot of skill and sheer hard work to get that far. Only the ones with an established record can attract the money for bigger films.

Blockbusters tend to be formula films with all the things that the demographic studies show will appeal to the widest audience. As a result they are often top heavy with special effects and big-name actors or actresses. Blockbusters are becoming increasingly expensive to produce and are few and far between. With funds drying up in the U.S. many smaller producers have moved to other countries where they can get tax concessions, spectacular or different scenery, plenty of inexpensive extras and competent technical staff. New Zealand was an early example and their film industry has suffered less than that of the U.S.

There is a big market for TV films, or even direct-to-DVD. It is this market that Peacock has centred on. The films they distribute are often based on much earlier plots, rewritten, and may even have footage bought from other companies. The new films are generally by unknown directors and actors, but the quality is higher than average with a little extra funding injected into each film. I think in some cases the remakes are better than the originals. Because they have minimal special effects and production costs the films that Peacock distributes can be described as Cheap Thrills. That is in no way derogatory. They simply distribute good entertainment at sensible prices. Keep it up.

Let's have a look at some forthcoming releases.

Special Ops
aka Disarmed
Thriller
Region 0



This is a rather cliché-driven film. Scientist invents micro-chip that can be used to make a portable atomic weapon. He is kidnapped by Filipino terrorists. A Special Operations force is sent in to retrieve him and his device. They walk into an ambush set up by the evil U.S. military. There is only one survivor who now goes for revenge. He allies himself with a Filipino good guy with a lot of useful "cousins" who can sell him arms etc. The final showdown is, as usual, in an abandoned factory. There is lots of shooting, punching and brawling.

Although the film is set in the Philippines it appears to have been made in Mexico with clips from the Philippines cut in. The result is quite credible and often visually pleasing. The characterisations are a little better than average for this style of film and the local people are treated with warmth and humour.

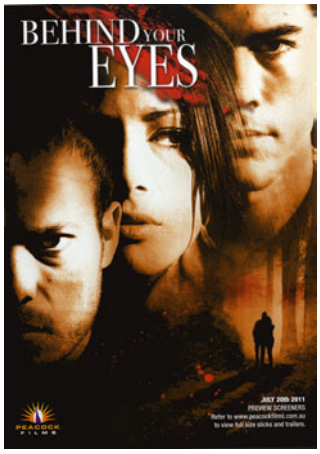
The film has one major letdown. The hero is played by A J Draven and he mumbles and





whispers his lines to the point that sometimes the words are incomprehensible. This is not helped by a soundtrack that is often so loud that it overrides any speech. This area really needs re-editing. Fortunately it doesn't really interfere too much with following the plot. Otherwise the film is exactly what you need for a bit of light relief. Tons of action, exotic locations and an adequate if clichéd plot – what more could you want?

Behind Your Eyes
Suspense / Thriller
R0 DVD



Erika and her boy-friend Steven are on their way to meet her parents. They are abducted by a man who directs them to an old house hidden in the woods.

There he ties them up and humiliates them and beats them. Strangely he gives most of his attention to Steven. He flogs Steven with his belt, orders Erika to slap him about, and generally does everything he can to Steven. Erika gets her share as well but the abductor seems less interested in her.

They escape to another house in the woods and there they meet an old man and his wife. The husband is a Bible-basher who seems harmless, but whose obsession with God seems a little ominous. Then the son, the abductor, turns up. The house is his parents' home and he has been away for years trying to sort himself out. He is torn between his need for his family and the fact that he now knows he is gay. His father will have none of this.



He must become a man and cleanse himself. To do this he will have to rape Erika then wash away his sins with her blood. Father will take care of it all, as usual. He admits he has fifty three other "souls" buried around the woods. Even in his confused state the son knows this is wrong but he wants to be accepted back into his family again.

While he is making up his mind the two victims escape and extract their revenge on the whole family.

We have seen this sort of film before but this one is much better for having a raving religious







looney instead of the usual rednecks.

The son's motives make the whole film seem more rational rather than just a jumble of rampant violence, although it takes a while to get to that point and meanwhile the tension just builds. If you like this style of film, this is one of the better ones.

Meteor Storm
SF thriller
Region 0



The End of the World is nigh, yet again, due to a meteor storm from a supernova. The film is full of clichés – tough young ex-Air Force colonel, attractive astronomer wife, kids who simply won't do what they're told, a TV news crew that keeps getting in the way, and a gung-ho Air Force man whose answer to a problem is to nuke it.

One again the Golden Gate bridge gets it – if the meteors hit the east coast it would undoubtedly be the Statue of Liberty that would take the hit, but in the west it's the Golden Gate. There is much dashing about in news vans and on motorbikes and, of course, Family Values. Clichéd it might be, but the action rarely lets up and the film is visually excellent. The effects are few but effective. The collapse of the Golden Gate bridge is particularly impressive.

As is usual in these films the science ranges from a bit dodgy to complete nonsense. The meteors are made of a previously unknown element that appears to home in on electromagnetic radiation, like mobile phone towers. If a meteor made from an element heavier than uranium hits the earth it should theoretically cause a monumental hole.

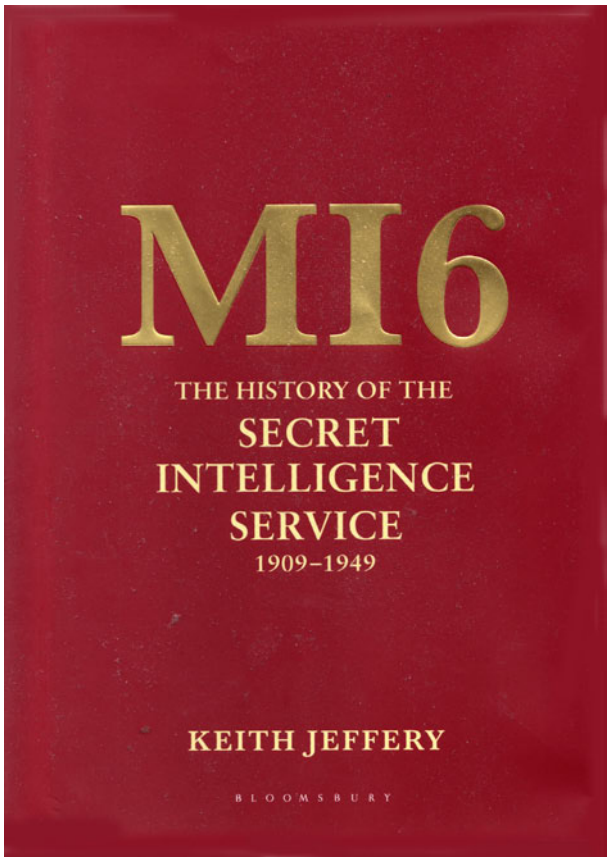
These ones just lie there and smoke a bit. The meteor swarm can, of course, be destroyed by the electromagnetic pulse from an exploding nuclear missile but this will require the last-minute cooperation of the USSR to guide the missile.

The film was made for TV and is a good budget example of the Apocalypse genre. Lots of fun.





MI6: The History of the Secret Intelligence Service 1909 – 1949
Keith Jeffery
Published by Bloomsbury

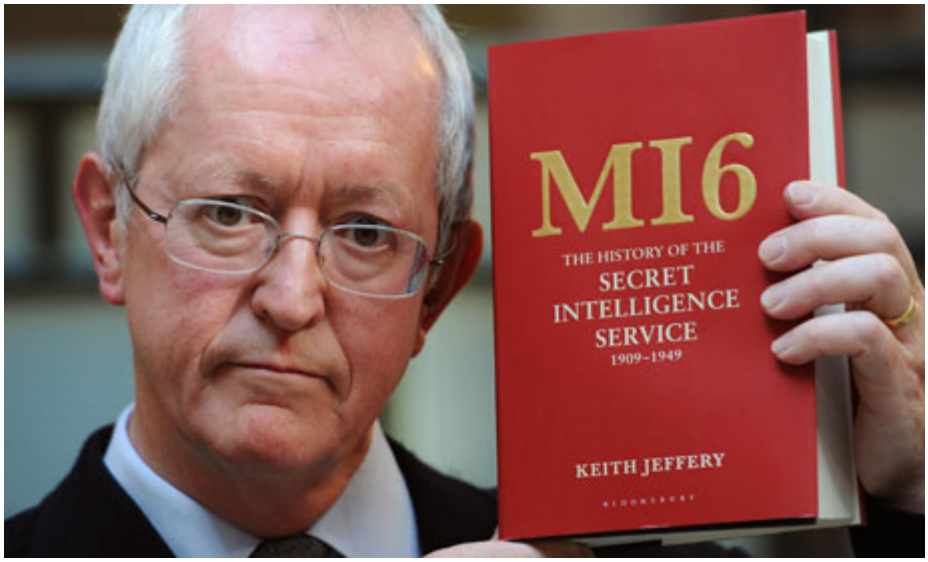


This a timely book dealing with the founding and growth of one of the world's great intelligence services. Keith Jeffery has drawn on the remaining records of the organisation but so much of their historical documents have been destroyed over the years that the history is of necessity not always complete. In spite of this he has managed a highly detailed look at the organization, its people and to a lesser extent its field work.

He also covers the "Whitehall Warfare" as he calls the constant attempts to take over the organisation from the Foreign Office by other departments. From the book it appears that the chiefs of the SIS spent nearly as much time fighting for their existence as gathering intelligence. The story is nothing like a James Bond tale. The work consisted of relentless plodding attempts to secure useful agents and economic intelligence. Gradually SIS grew better at its work.

The Secret Service as it was then known was originally set up by the Admiralty, the War Office and the Foreign Office, under Foreign Office control. Its role was to centralise information gathering in areas of general interest, collate that information, then pass it to the government departments involved. Opposition came from the various wings of the military, each of which had its own intelligence service already. At their insistence representatives of each service were seconded to the new service. There they could represent the requirements of their own services and apply their expertise to the incoming information. Some services cooperated, some recalled their nominees to duty as soon as they showed talent in the SS.

The first Chief of the Service, Commander Mansfield Cumming, was himself a Navy man. He saw the Service off to a shaky start and shepherded its growth into "areas of interest" like Czarist Russia where a revolution was brewing. Finding agents in these areas was difficult. Many agents simply concocted information in return for payment. Some agents were paid for entire networks of spies that they supposedly put in place. Good information was sparse and difficult to confirm until the British put their own agents into the field. The key word was "secret" – a compromised agent could be fed dummy information and the payments would keep flowing. Some merce-





Bletchley Park

nary agents were selling the same information to the French, Germans and Turks as well.

The book follows the history of the Service through World War I then into the period of peace that occurred until 1939. Cumming had to fight ever-tightening budgets, reductions in areas of interest, rivalry from the three armed services, even the Special Branch of the Police. The Special Branch had the job of counter espionage as well as monitoring the IRA. A major political concern was the influence of Bolshevism on British workers. Special Branch was keeping a close eye on internal unrest caused by Russian agents (as were many European countries, in case the idea of revolution caught on). This, particularly, ensured the continued existence of the Service at a time when peace economies cut into many government budgets. Since they were under the Foreign Office the Secret Service was given Passport Control as part of its work. This let them monitor who was coming and going as well as providing a useful source of income.

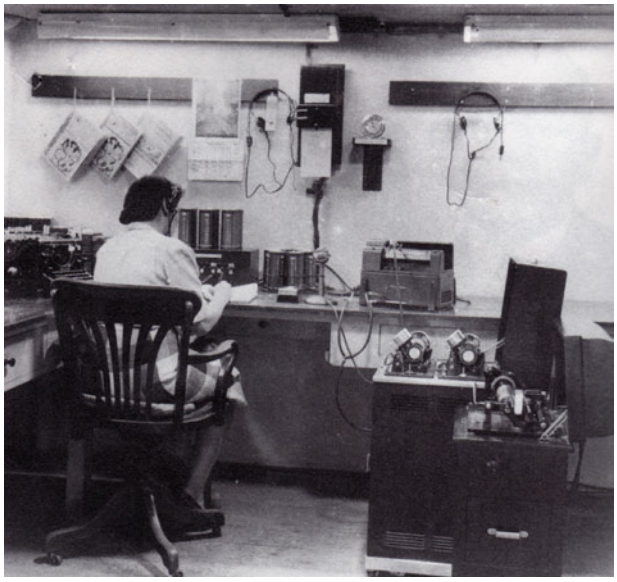
MI5 was tasked with maintaining internal security and its head, Sir Basil Thomson, saw the "Foreign Office service" as a takeover target. Cumming's stated attitude was that the well-funded MI5 had done little to monitor Bolshevism in Britain and had no expertise to find intelligence on it overseas. This was true so the Secret Service was generally left alone for a while.

By concentrating on overseas intelligence gathering Cumming managed to work around many of the conflicts. He divided the world into sections (Russia was just one) and set up local groups to monitor other areas. Here Cumming found allies among the armed services. The Army found the SS work especially useful and asked Cumming to keep an eye on the redeveloping Germany, as they and Cumming correctly regarded it as submissive but not really beaten. Some funding came from these client organisations. They also helped Cumming in the various Budget committees by designating which areas they were interested in, allowing Cumming to make budget cuts in less important areas.

By 1923 the organization had been named the Special Intelligence Service. One sideline that Jeffery points out is that Cumming signed all his letters and memos with the single letter "C". This tradition has continued into modern times. The need for the SIS work was widely accepted following a revelation that agents of at least four major powers were operating in Britain in spite of MI5. The SIS was organised into Production (of the raw information from its sources) and Circulation (of the information to interested parties). In the interests of maintaining the secret identities of its informants the reports were being rewritten and paraphrased, the beginnings of intelligence analysis, but analysis was not considered important by Cumming.

By the 1920s Cumming's health was failing and Rear Admiral Hugh Sinclair was nominated to take over the position. Cumming felt he was a good choice as he already had a background in Naval Intelligence.

The book discusses in detail the network of stations set up to monitor the areas of interest. Few of the stations were in the country being spied on, for safety reasons. Most information was still gathered by the old method of recruit-



ing agents inside the country then paying them for their work. Increasingly they attracted agents who were dissatisfied with the current regime, such as the ex-officers of the Russian Army who were cashiered by Stalin. The quality of information was often very accurate but was not always acted on in time by the politicians or the armed forces, a point that Sinclair was not slow in pointing out when needed. Sinclair sometimes had to fight off demands from the local Foreign Office people that they should have oversight of intelligence-gathering in their areas. This was very noticeable where career diplomats saw the SIS as a chance to increase their power, or where the SIS reports differed with their own interpretations.

Gradually the system fell into place as the quality of the information and the agents improved. The SIS concentrated on likely trouble areas. Communist Russia was always a target. The rise in militarism in Germany was noted and the SIS cooperated with the French to keep an eye on this low level threat but its significance went unnoticed by British politicians. Italy was largely ignored in the face of the new government in Turkey – who would it support or be influenced by? Was it a threat? Should Britain support Greece as usual or Turkey? Whitehall was still concerned about Communist influence. Information on the Middle East countries was sparse as there was no apparent military threat there and funds were limited. Britain therefore had little understanding of the rising feeling of Arab nationalism that was to become a problem after the Second World War. Egypt was the only country of much interest, as a rise in Communism could lead to the vital Suez Canal being closed. Jeffery discusses these problems in detail and it is easy to see why Whitehall was often looking in the wrong direction.

The politicians and government departments were growing used to referring their problems to Sinclair with requests for information, to the point that Sinclair complained that he simply didn't have the funds to meet all the demands. Funding was increased dramatically over the next five years and went a long way to relieve the problem. With World War II looming it was just in time, too. The SIS also had control of the Government Code and Cypher School which was providing valuable signals intelligence. The Japanese and American diplomatic codes were broken, most Italian signals could be read – only the German codes still remained a mystery, a problem that was to haunt the British in the early years of the next war.



Sir Mansfield Cumming

In 1925 the conflict between MI5, Special Branch and the SIS over internal counterespionage in Britain was again raised. Sinclair was asked did SIS employ any agents within Britain? He answered with exasperation that since the other services did not employ a single agent, and since much of the external information gained by his section had internal relevance as well, he had been required to "make his own arrangements". This led to internal security and counterespionage being finally given to SIS. In this period other governments were becoming aware of the SIS and a number of attempts to penetrate the organization were detected.

There was still conflict between Military Intelligence, SIS and the Special Branch. This was resolved in 1931 when SIS was placed under Colonel Kell of MI5 to handle all external foreign espionage and MI5 was itself to handle all

British Empire intelligence. Since MI5 was already responsible for counterespionage in the military and diplomatic services it also took over SIS's internal counterespionage role. The new organization was taken out of Foreign Office and War Office control. It now became the Security Service (internal counterespionage) and SIS (external espionage). Britain's security forces were finally more or less united.

There was little intelligence presence in Japan. Sinclair had trouble getting agents in place and Jeffery gives detailed examples of the reasons for this. The Head of the Far East Station of the Navy wanted information that Sinclair could not supply. This was a problem as Japan had quietly built up one of the world's best Navies and a large Air Force. Their ships and aircraft were as good as anything the British had, a point soon made forcibly by the sinking of the Prince of Wales and the Repulse and the taking of Singapore. Sinclair's man in the Far East, Steptoe, was held in low esteem by the other services. His role was well known by all concerned and his intelligence output was minimal.

Russia was not forgotten. In 1933 SIS set up a Russian by the name of "Jonny" who provided vital high-level information on Communist activities in Britain. Jonny also travelled extensively as part of his work and passed back details of agents, their aliases, the activities of the ComIntern in other countries and a large amount of other useful information. Jonny's career lasted until 1939 when he was arrested for espionage. The British got him out and he retired from the Service. This just one of the many agent stories that Jeffery has been able to include in the book.

With growing militarism in Germany and Italy Britain's attention once again focussed on Europe, especially after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. To Britain's surprise they found that Germany and Italy both had modern Air Forces. Both countries were building modern, powerful navies. Such a threat to Gibraltar and the Suez Canal could not be ignored. Again Sinclair found himself without agents in place in Spain – nobody had thought that the Civil War might attract combatants from other countries. Despite the opportunities the Armed Services had received no information whatever on new German or Italian aircraft, weapons, or tactics and they made the point forcefully in a number of memos.



SIS HQ 1911

The situation on political espionage in Germany was different. Cumming's caution about Germany's recovery and its future military threat was proving well-founded. There at least the SIS had been working away for some time and had some useful agents in place. They had branched out into economic intelligence to study the manufacturing and industrial capabilities of target countries.

SIS developed a compact wireless set for their agents. When the Germans attacked Prague the station's wireless set was the only communication between the Embassy and Britain until Poland collapsed. Wireless signal interception was a useful source of information, as was the old-fashioned tapping of Embassy phones. Eventually the wireless "school" was transferred to Bletchley Park with many of the Signals people, and there during World War II it undertook the cracking of the Enigma code machine that was used on German ships.

During 1938 a new group was planned independently with the aim of carrying out sabotage work in enemy occupied lands. This section developed a life of its own, sometimes to the detriment of SIS. The section eventually became known as the Special Operations Executive and did valuable behind-the-lines missions, but hostility between SOE and SIS remained as their operations sometimes interfered with each other.

When Sinclair died he left a letter recommending Stewart Menzies for the position. Although there was the usual jockeying for the position

Menzies won through and immediately faced another enquiry into the SIS organisation. This was simply an attempted power grab by the other Intelligence Directorates. The enquiry began as Britain was going to war and seemed to confirm that Britain's biggest enemy was its own Civil Service. The SIS weathered the inquiry and got on with the war.

With the initial battles and the occupation of Poland and France concluded, the SIS found that much of its infrastructure of agents was now unusable. They developed a presence in Finland where they obtained useful intelligence about the Russians but even this failed when the Russians occupied the country. The SIS did, however, inherit the French intelligence network there. The SIS network in France took longer to repair due to rivalry between the Free French and the Vichy French. It was vital to know just which side they were dealing with. Air drops and the placing of agents by aircraft eventually made the communications easier. Jeffery provides a thorough summary of this important phase of the war.

SIS's new scientific section became useful at this time, warning of the German interest in the heavy water produced at the Norsk Hydro plant in Norway and its possible use in atomic bombs. They were later involved in the identification and monitoring of the Peenemunde site where the German V-weapons were tested and the identification of the rocket powered Messerschmitt 163 interceptor. They also initiated investigations into the possible use of anthrax against Britain.

The vital station in Switzerland was hampered by poor internal security and communications. The cover of the station Head was blown quickly when the Swiss arrested a British agent. This hurt relations between Switzerland and Britain for some time. There were, however, intelligence gains in Belgium that shed light on German night fighter operations. This was useful when the bombing of Germany started.

Espionage inside Germany was reliant on contacts from neighbouring countries like Switzerland and the Netherlands. Once again the old rivalry between SIS and SOE emerged but when it was settled down SOE ran operations into the occupied countries from which any intelligence they gathered was passed to SIS.

Many networks of agents could no longer function when their communications were cut by the Germans. Some ex-intelligence chiefs in the occupied countries were able to get their information out to SIS and gradually the networks were rebuilt. In one case the Czechoslovakian Intelligence Service got most of their personnel and records to Britain. This was not without difficulty as the Gestapo was becoming more efficient. Many agents just disappeared and their fates were not known until after the war. Even some Germans were able to produce information, although only at terrible risk to themselves.

Increasing pressure was put on SIS from their clients to provide more Information, even from countries where they had not yet rebuilt their networks. The queries ranged from military information to the identity of Lord Haw Haw, the British traitor who broadcast anti-British propaganda for the Germans.

The book describes in detail the early victories and losses on the intelligence front and examines the wide range of countries and political problems to be dealt with. SIS was not supposed to work in countries under Russian influence after they joined the Allies. Supposedly neutral countries like Sweden were providing information from their own intelligence services. Turkey was cooperative as well, although nominally neutral (Turkey felt threatened by Italian ambitions in their area). The SIS network in Turkey was ideally placed to cover areas of Italian and German influence in the Balkans and the Mediterranean. It provided a fallback position for the embassy and SIS staff in Greece if that country was invaded. This proved a wise move. Turkey station became one of the main nodes of intelligence-gathering. It was not without problems. Embassy staff were concerned at the number of SIS and SOE staff operating almost openly in the country.

Cairo station, including Jerusalem, Aden and Baghdad, kept an eye on the Italian refugee Jews moving into Palestine. Some were talking of returning to Italy as the war settled down and SIS was interested in recruiting them as agents.

Counterespionage was also becoming more important as German agents were recruited among the refugees. The world had been broken up into areas, and the controller of the Iberian zone, a critically important area, was Kim



Kim Philby

Philby. He was a trusted man in SIS until his unmasking after the war as a Russian spy.

A major success was with American OSS chief "Wild Bill" Donovan. He was being supplied with all U.S.-related information from the end of 1940 by British intelligence and had a very good working relationship with Menzies at SIS. Jeffrey suggests that his endorsement was critical in setting up the Lend Lease program that provided Britain with badly needed shipping.
.
SIS's lack of attention to the Far East was a problem after Pearl Harbor. The nearest stations were in China and the Philippines, both now Japanese targets. Obtaining agents inside militaristic Japan was nearly impossible so such information as they could supply, even through an increased number of stations, was very limited.

As the war progressed SIS found itself embroiled in local politics. The war was a chance for many groups to improve their power in their own countries and SIS was often caught in the middle. The book has a good explanation of these developing tensions. In Czechoslovakia the Communist-backed Cetniks were fighting the royalists. In France and the former territories in North Africa the conflict was between the Vichy French and the de Gaullists. In Italy the Communists were building their influence with a particularly active resistance to the Germans. In Arab countries many nationalist groups thought the war was a chance to advance their own freedom. In Palestine there was going to be trouble between the Jewish immigrants and the local Arabs as Jewish immigrant numbers built up. In Greece the Communist and Royalist groups were lining up for a fight. In China the Nationalists and Communists were spreading their influence and would come into active conflict at the end of the War. And so it went, but this made it harder for SIS to establish in a country without knowing the local politics. Jeffrey's analysis of each of these areas would have been regarded as valuable intelligence back then.

Jeffrey's examination of the place of SIS intelligence leading up to the war is significant. The lack of agents in place was often matched by a lack of understanding of the region by Whitehall. Their concern was for Burma and India and they could not or would not understand the Japanese need for raw materials like rubber and oil. This relative inactivity was to lead to the loss of Singapore and the East Indies. SIS had provided at least two months notice of the impending invasion of Siam and Malaya but the lack of a proper assessment group meant that the information was largely disregarded. In spite of this SIS received the blame when the India command demanded information that simply could not yet be provided. This problem dogged SIS, and indeed from Jeffrey's explanation it could be a problem with any intelligence service.

In 1943 the post-war role of SIS was again questioned. Once again there were suggestions that all intelligence services should be combined. The heads of the various organizations had a good system of conferences and meetings in place and most resisted any attempt to join in another power grab. The pressure persisted and in 1943 Sir Nevile Bland was commissioned to report on the future activities of SIS. Bland was a good choice as he had been involved in various security posts for many years. His recommendation was a blueprint for the SIS. SIS was to operate only in countries outside Britain and the Commonwealth members. It would remain under Foreign Office con-

trol. No other outside organizations would be permitted to operate in foreign countries without the full knowledge of SIS. (This neatly circumscribed the activities of SOE and the foreign activities of MI5). Bland recommended that SIS should become a truly secret organisation. Too many of its officers were known to host countries and other intelligence services. The elitism of recruiting should be dropped and a more commercial, ability-based recruiting program introduced. This policy was reinforced in later disasters when Kim Philby and others were found to be spying for the Russians despite having been recruited from the great public schools and therefore above suspicion. This report, however, did not stop Montgomery as Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from making yet another takeover bid in 1947.

SOE fought a rear-guard action but was eventually absorbed into SIS and wound down now that its primary role had reduced. SIS would not operate in Britain, that being the defined province of MI5.

The invasion of Europe on D-Day was something of a triumph for inter-service cooperation. The intelligence gathered was so good that the Allies went ashore with highly detailed maps onto beaches where every defensive position had been plotted. They knew what opposition they would face, what German reserves were available, and which ports to capture before they could be destroyed by the Germans. Well-trained and equipped agents were parachuted in before the invasion to prepare the local resistance groups. This was not without cost. Of the 89 agents sent into the Netherlands 67 were shot or died in captivity.

After the War the SIS ‘s prime role was cleaning up the remaining areas of possible problems. In Germany for instance they had to make sure the new administration was free of Nazis and those who might slip into top positions with the intent of restoring Nazi-style power. Increasingly Communism was seen as an enemy once more as the world wound up towards the Cold War. All those internal conflicts that had been suspended during the war now restarted in many countries. One example will suffice. The British remained in power in Palestine but faced increasing opposition from Arab and Jewish groups. SIS was watching the area in case the flood of Jewish immigrants should pose a threat of agents being placed in the sensitive area. When



MI6 Today

some of the freedom groups started using terrorist actions to make their point SIS had a fairly good understanding of who their enemy was. Since they had taken over SOE they were tasked with the clandestine destruction of the refugee ships delivering thousands of illegal immigrants to Palestine. They planted limpet mines on the ships in such a way that they were discovered before anyone was killed. A dummy “communist” organisation was set up to take responsibility. The idea was to make illegals apprehensive about getting into Palestine by ship. It only partly worked. The heavy-handed British reaction to the Palestine terrorists caused more unrest and eventually the British were forced out of the country.

Relations with the Americans remained cordial and Menzies went out of his way to supply them with all relative intelligence and to establish a good working relationship with their new CIA.

Keith Jeffery has taken us from the earliest days when Cumming’s new organization was a one-man band looking for something to do, to the beginning of the Cold War when its worldwide role was essential to Britain’s security. He shows us the political infighting in Whitehall that has plagued the service through so much of its history. In the process we get a good picture of the characters of many of the key players. Jeffery is not afraid to point out the failures as well as the victories, but much of the operations in the field remain poorly documented. His book is thoroughly researched and detailed and contains a further 34 pages of cross references and notes. It will become the standard reference work for what is otherwise a largely unknown business.

8.5 Hours
Breaking Glass Pictures
R1 DVD



We need more films from Ireland. 8.5 Hours is a micro-budget film that packs a tense plot and brilliant acting. I am amazed that Director Brian Lally managed to produce such a film without the facilities you would expect from a large studio.

The film is set towards the end of the boom time in Ireland, when the so-called Celtic Tiger is on the verge of its monumental collapse. Everyone was out to get what they could and the grand lifestyle seemed set to go on forever for those strong enough to carve out their share. The scene is a small software company who has successfully taken advantage of the boom but is now tightening its belt. Meanwhile the staff, blissfully unaware, have their own problems.

Tony, a serial womaniser, is being stalked by the mother of a girl he got pregnant last year. The girl committed suicide and her mother thinks Tony should pay for it. She haunts him day and night but she is completely unbalanced and Tony's misdeeds are brought home to him in an astonishing way.

Frank, the team leader, finds his wife is having an affair with his best friend David. Marriage and stability means everything to him and he is totally lost in his sense of betrayal. Can he forgive his wife and try to restart his life?





Eoin is the firm's main programmer and is about to be married to a girl he loves dearly.
He is also having a gay relationship with Simon, a man he met at a party. Simon is the manager of the firm and has faced him with the question "do you prefer men or women?" Eoin is shattered. What does he tell his wedding-obsessed fiancée?

Rachel is a young woman who wants the good life that is always just out of her reach. She has just had a painful breakup with her boyfriend and is desperate to buy a top-end apartment close to her work. It is beyond her means but if she can get a decent raise from Simon she can just afford the mortgage. She knows of his homosexual relationship with Eoin and blackmails her way to the pay rise. Even Rachel, though, falls prey to a predatory real estate salesman and she begins to wonder if the sacrifice is worth the humiliation.

In one eight and a half hour day life has crashed for these people. In the end, has their own greed and selfishness brought them down or can they resurrect their lives? At the start of the film we can sympathise with most of these people, waiting for the axe to fall. By the end of the film we have seen a display of the nastier side of careers and ambitions.

I won't single out any one actor or actress since they are all superb in their parts. Brian Lally has coaxed great performances from each. I am not usually a fan of human dramas but I found myself being drawn into the characters' problems and I just couldn't stop watching as they dragged themselves down.

9th Company
Eagle Entertainment
R4 DVD

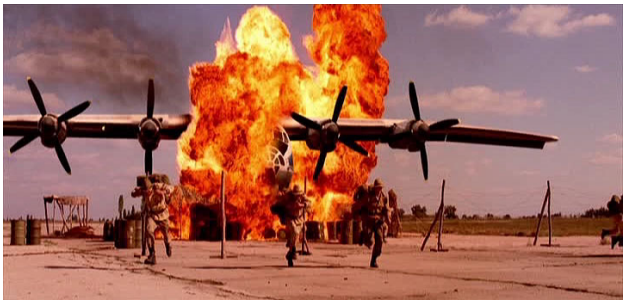


Russian with English subtitles or American overdub.

When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan they learned a lesson that the U.S. should have learned in Vietnam but didn't – you can't successfully fight a high-tech war against a low-tech country. You can bomb a village of mud bricks but all you do is make a new lot of enemies. The people of Afghanistan formed the resistance group called the Mujahideen, a civilian militia operating as guerrillas. Armed with U.S and captured weapons the Mujahideen attacked Soviet bases, convoys and aircraft. After a while every Soviet convoy was escorted by well-armed helicopters that also acted as aerial cover for aircraft landings and takeoffs. Soviet outposts were also a popular target.

It is 1988 and the war is reaching its climax. A group of young Russian recruits is sent to a three month training camp before going to Afghanistan. Drill Sgt Digalo drives them mercilessly and from his scarred face it looks like he knows what he is talking about. When the recruits arrive in Afghanistan the plane taking the men they have replaced is shot down by missiles. It is not much of a welcome to the hostile country.

They are sent to an outpost where they are tasked to send out patrols to keep the Mujahideen away from their convoys and aircraft. It is generally boring in between occasional brief firefights. In their down time we learn a lot about the men and their reasons for joining. One wants to get away from the police, another who is an artist wants to experience life so he can depict it better in his paintings. Their old drill sergeant wants to get back into combat, but he





is regarded as a bit suicidal by his superiors. Meanwhile they train to operate in the hostile territory. They have little contact with the Afghanis who are regarded as treacherous. Nobody seems concerned about their point of view on the Russian invasion.

Finally the Mujahideen attack the outpost in force.

Except for the final attack there is little combat shown. Like most soldiers away from home they make their own entertainment. During the battle we will see how good their training and support is. Some will not survive the experience.

The film seems to have a lot in common with the old classic All Quiet on the Western Front – the same experiences of battle, the same self-reliance when headquarters can't help them, the same motives apart from a noticeable lack of patriotism among the men.

The film is visually stunning and well-acted. It does not preach – it is a film about soldiers, not politics. The only weak point is in the overdub in America accents with American slang and swearing. I suggest you leave the film in Russian and turn on the subtitles.



Cry of The Owl
Reel DVD
R4 DVD



This film is based on a book by Patricia Highsmith, writer of The Talented Mr Ripley. It is not the first time the book has been turned into film. French director Claude Chabrol produced a film based on the book in 1968. I haven't seen his version so I can't compare the two. The newer film is a good suspense film with only a couple of minor letdowns. Normally I would avoid U.S. remakes but in this case British director Jamie Thraves has done a good job.

Robert is an architect who has left New York for a small upstate town where he will try to rebuild his life. He has just gone through a painful divorce from his mean-spirited and heartless wife, and a case of depression. He feels the peace and quiet of a country town may be what he needs to fully recover. That he still has issues (and I suspect is still on medication) becomes obvious when he starts spying on Jenny, his next door neighbour. One night she catches him and rather than call the police she invites him in, perhaps sensing that he is no threat to her and may in fact be a bit of a coward. Jenny rationalises that their meeting was foreordained. When we learn that she has just broken up with her drunken, vicious boyfriend Greg we see that she also has some problems to resolve, like Robert.

Although Robert would rather let the episode blow over Jenny obsessively begins to stalk him. Greg finds out and turns mean. One night he savagely bashes Robert. Robert gets in a lucky hit and Greg falls into the river. Robert drags him out and leaves him unconscious on





the riverbank. The police become involved when Greg goes missing. Robert is now suspected of Greg's murder. Somehow details of Robert's mental problems are getting around town and he now regarded as a psycho killer.

Finally somebody takes a potshot at him and the police realise there may be something in Robert's story after all. Greg's body still hasn't been found. Who is responsible? What has happened to Greg? Who knows so much about Robert's history?

There has been some criticism that Paddy Considine, who plays Robert, plays the part rather flat. I don't agree. His quiet demeanour and slow reactions are typical reactions to some antidepressant drugs and Considine may just be building experience of this into Robert's role. Otherwise each member of the cast plays their role well. The cinematography is largely at night and its dark moodiness perfectly suits the film. The only note that is really out of place is that the office scenes seem abnormal in their everyday ordinariness.

The film is a bit of mystery, a bit of suspense and a bit of crime drama mixed together into a very satisfying if grim film.



Deadland
Eagle Entertainment
R4



Once again, it's The End Of The World. The bombs have been dropped and now one man is searching desperately for his wife in the depopulated post-apocalypse United States.

The U.S, has been divided up into provinces something like the old medieval feudal system. Strong military commanders have taken what's left of their units and built them up into militia that now rule the Provinces with an iron hand. They have set up prostitution camps. With the U.S. largely depopulated it is hard to tell what they are ruling or where they are getting food and fuel for their vehicles.

Sean Kalos is looking for his wife and believes she may be being held in one of the prostitution camps and he sets out to rescue her. So much for Family Values. In the five years he has been looking for her he still hasn't managed to find a weapon, but he is armed with a copy of the Bible given to him by one of the survivors living wild in the forest (Deadland? Not really). That takes care of Good Christian Values, so we know he will be successful. It's that sort of film.

For some reason the local militia headquarters is a draughty old wooden cabin and a few derelict Winnebagos in a clearing in the forest. All the survivors of the bombs are infected with plague. The militia at least has a supply of anti-



dote to it. Sean must fight his way into the compound, rescue all the women, find his wife among them, get them to safety and start a revolution against the Province rulers so Truth, Justice and The American Way can be reintroduced. Then he has to cure the plague. Can he do it? Of course he can do it – was there ever any doubt?

In spite of cliché after cliché the film has its good points. Director Damon O"Steen has an eye for a nice shot of the forests and streams. It is vastly different (and better) than the conventional dusty town in the middle of the desert. Of course this doesn't exactly look like Deadland, but he has broken away from the clichés. William Katt in his brief appearance as a code-breaker is brilliantly fussy and eccentric.

The hero is played by Gary Weeks who also wrote the rather convoluted story. I am not sure if he just can't act or whether he saw his part as the lost and lonely tough guy. It doesn't really matter. He still manages to hold the story together in the face of the other stereotype characters and he has plenty of muscles to amuse the lady viewers.







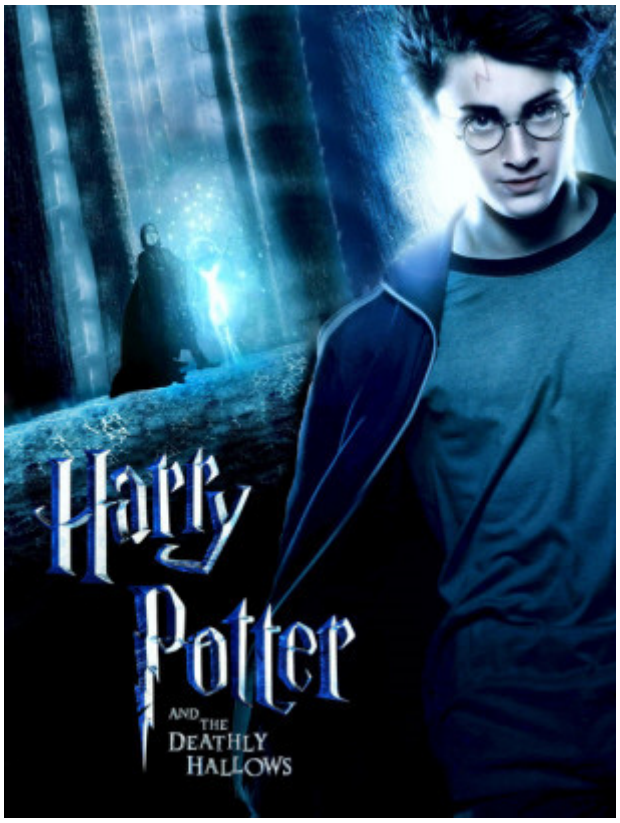
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The film has "microbudget" written all over it, from the lack of effects to the heavy use of outdoor scenery. Yet even with a clichéd story that's full of holes, unconvincing actors and incredible coincidences it's quite an entertaining film.

I still have mixed feelings about the overall quality but I must admit I enjoyed it. Give it a try and make up your own mind.





Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 1
Warner Bros
R4 DVD

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 1 is the penultimate conclusion to the series. It opening makes it abundantly clear that it will be a very different experience from the early bubbly magical movies. "These *are dark times, there is no denying*" Bill Nighy tells us face to the screen in the opening scenes. This is a great change from what has gone before, while the CGI and special effects are impressive, the emphasis on mood and character development is impressive and the darkness evoked stays throughout the whole film.





It is certainly no longer a children's movie and as the major characters are maturing so are the films. The whole film has a colour palette which reflects its mood and explores the nature of evil, friendship, relationships and courage. Harry has developed from a young child to someone who must explore his fears, love and quickly inner strength if he wishes to save his friends. The depth of the relationship between all three of them carry the film.

Harry, Ron and Hermione take on a quest to save the world from Lord Voldemont and they must do it alone since the Ministry of Magic has been compromised. They cut their ties with home, Hogwarts and the Ministry and set out to find the horcruxes, slivers of Voldemort's soul. Only when they have been destroyed can Voldemort be destroyed forever. After many difficult experiences, including having to face their own feelings, they find the sword of Gryffindor and are able to destroy the pendant which contains one of the horcruxes. But this comes at great cost and with the loss of many friends leaving them to fight and grow on their own. The various myths and legends developed throughout the film give the myth a special quality, bringing old world fairytales into the 21st century.



The imagery is far more developed than in earlier film with startling scenes of the now fascistic Ministry of Magic and its "show trials" of muggles who claim to be witches. Little touches like the anti-muggles propaganda and Harry's face on wanted posters increase the fascistic feel of the Ministry sections of the film. You see a lot more of Voldemont in this film and his superbly refined evil (and his marvellous giant snakes) is a joy to behold. At times his superb malevolence is such you have to admire him, or is that just me ? The action sequences are also impressive, I enjoyed the motorcycle chase through the roads and tunnels and the escape from the Ministry.

While there are lighter moments this is a darker film with a strong gothic feel, it will surprise many Harry Potter fans and while some have complained about its length at around 2½ hours I think there is a lot to cover and it works well. It will certainly be interesting to see how the final film lives up to expectations.

Love At First Kill
Anchor Bay Entertainment
R4 DVD



A dark suspense film, Love At First Kill looks at paranoia and its effects on those afflicted with it. It was originally called - The last person I would have chosen for the part of a paranoid delusional mother is Margot Kidder (I last saw her in Superman) but she carries the part very credibly.

She plays overprotective mother Beth who lives on the outskirts of a quiet country town with her not-quite-all-there son Harry. Harry has nightmares of a fight between his mother and father when he was a very young boy. He also dreams of his mother dragging his father off into the woods to the railway lines, although most of the details are just shadowy hints. His mind has successfully suppressed the trauma that caused the nightmares. All his life his mother has refused to tell him anything about his father. Now, twenty years older, Beth hobbles around on her walking stick and generally clings to and dominates Harry.





A young woman, Marie, moves in next door with her daughter Kiki and when Harry offers to help her unload and generally becomes friendly with her, Beth sees her control of Harry slipping. She resents it and predicts there will be violence and death without being too specific. Harry meanwhile overrules his mother and shows some independence for the first time. Marie has her own emotional baggage. She has a violent ex-husband who is looking for her and when a rock smashes through a window in Marie's house one night it is blamed on the ex. Coincidentally he turns up about this time and threatens Marie. Harry intercedes and the police arrive and take the ex into custody, but the experience pushes Harry and Marie closer together. They make plans to move on together but this pushes Beth completely into insanity. The vengeful woman makes her own plans.

The part of Beth is what the plot revolves around. Although Margot Kidder plays the part strongly there are times when it seems a little overdone and melodramatic. Her permanently embittered look seems a little unreal. This aside, it is a good piece of suspense.





Obsolescence
Cinephreak Pictures

After a considerable absence Jakob Bilinski has returned with his chilling prequel Obsolescence. The short (26 minutes) film is best called a prequel because Bilinski would like to see it become the pilot for a TV or Web series. This would work, as the film's plot has many openings to base episodes on. This short film lays down the plot and establishes the significant players.

Nick's girlfriend, with whom he was deeply in love, has died. He finds she was really a laboratory construct with a built-in obsolescence date. The corporation's intent is to breed people who will have a shorter lifespan then decently expire. By ending their lives prematurely the world's remaining resources will be conserved for the lucky few who will live a normal long life. Who is funding the corporation for this work?

Nick goes off the deep end. At the opening of the film he is torturing a girl who works for the corporation. He will get to the bottom of it and take his revenge.





Bilinski and his friend Scott Ganyo have rewritten Bilinski's original idea into the makings of a powerful series. Surprising for such a high-quality product, the film was shot on a shoestring that makes budget films look positively overfunded. Ganyo and Jen Lilley provide the central actors.

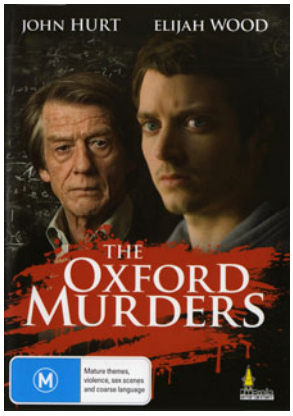
Luca Ellis is smoothly evil as Detrick, the corporation head, and Rosalind Rubin plays the tortured Tess (we don't find out her place in the story, just yet) is brilliant. That's it – the four actors, a minimal crew, and a weekend's shooting. Yet the film doesn't look "budget". Perhaps we are so engrossed in the plot that we just don't notice.

The team of Bilinski and Ganyo have created an innovative concept that could grow into a major series. Let's hope it does.

Web: http://www.cinephreakpictures.com



The Oxford Murders
Tornasol Films
Umbrella Entertainment
R4 DVD



An old and irascible woman is murdered in the University town of Oxford. A strange note with an odd perfect circle drawn on it and the circumstances of her death lead the elderly Professor Arthur Seldom (John Hurt), an expert on logic, to predict that there will be more deaths.

He sees the world in terms of mathematics and logic, and the symbol "O" is the start of many mathematical progressions. The trouble is he needs more killings and notes to construct the sequence so he can project who the next victim will be.

Young graduate student and mathematics prodigy Martin (Elijah Wood) isn't quite so obsessed by academic mathematics but he turned up on the lady's doorstep at the same time as Seldom to visit her daughter. Seldom and Martin are thrown together, first as suspects, then when more deaths occur as the only help the Police can call on. Confusing the issue is that the murders are what Seldom calls "imperceptible" – the victims are already dying and their deaths could be overlooked as natural causes if it wasn't for the notes.

In the best British tradition the plot has many twists and turns as suspects are selected then discarded. The final events reveal a killer nobody had suspected, with an unexpected motive that has nothing to do with mathematics.



I must say I felt Hurt's performance was a little over the top for a respected Professor, but he does make the part his own and Seldom becomes the powerful if eccentric intellect who carries the story. Seldom's problem is he sees all the world in logical terms and in this case that is a weakness.

Wood plays the student well, showing a certain awe of the Professor but determined to make his own way in the academic world.

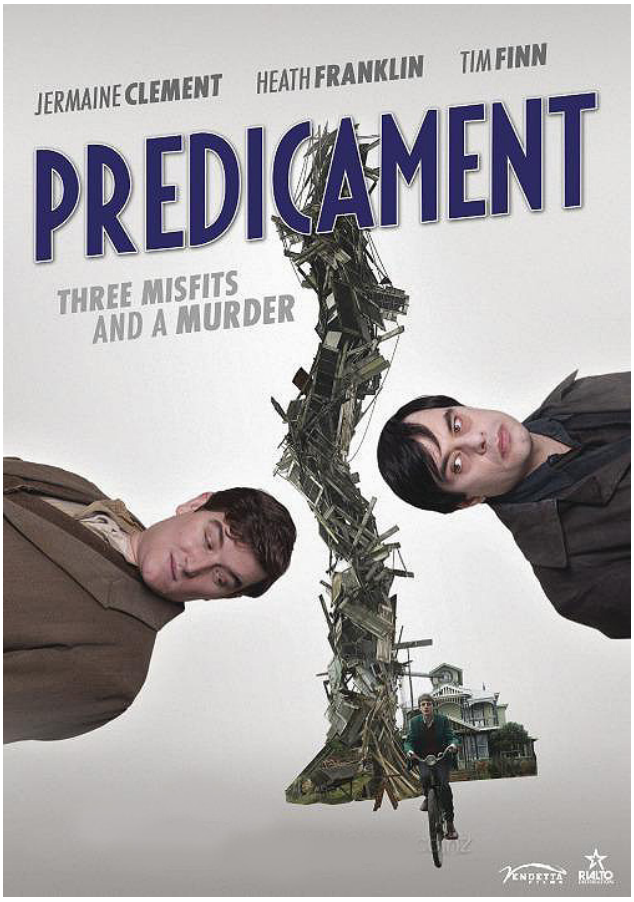
The story is slow-moving for the first quarter as the actors establish their characters and the background, then we get into the "pick the killer" phase. Production quality is high.

There is the usual "Behind the Scenes" extra that really adds little to what is simply a good murder mystery.





Predicament
Drama
New Zealand
Reel DVD
R4 DVD



Young Cedric is in a big predicament. He is a naive, lonely youngster who is bullied at school. His father is an embarrassment to him. Since Cedric's mother died his father has lost touch with reality and is building a huge ramshackle tower in their front yard. Dad apparently wants to get closer to Heaven so he can see his beloved wife again. This, of course, is a great source of amusement to the locals and of embarrassment to Cedric. Due to Dad's unstable mental condition he has let himself be swindled out of a large property that is now being used to build a new housing subdivision by one of the local millionaire developers, Bramwell. Cedric hates the arrogant young son of the developer, because the son ran him over one day but got off the charge by calling some friendly "witnesses".

Cedric has been befriended by Mervyn who has imposed himself on Cedric and moved in with Cedric and his Gran. There is some doubt about the death of Mervyn's father, who was the town methylated spirits drinker. They are joined by Mervyn's friend Spook, a would-be petty criminal who so far hasn't graduated past stealing the money left out for the milkman each evening.

Mervyn has come up with a get-rich-quick scheme – they will take photos of the local identities in compromising adulterous positions then blackmail them. Cedric has been roped in to this scheme reluctantly, as he is not by nature cut out to be a criminal. He sees it as a way to get back at Bramwell's son who is having it off with his father's new, very young wife. The scheme seems to work then goes horribly wrong with Spook's death at the hands of Bramwell's son. Cedric's predicament is that he is now a murder suspect. Mervyn has hurriedly left town as the police close in on him and the police think Cedric knows something about Mervyn's father's death. They are also looking for the blackmailer who has upset local citizens.







Oh, and Cedric has a box with Spook's head in it under his bed.

How can he get out of this? He has to disengage himself from Mervyn, who will dob him in to the police as part of the blackmail conspiracy if caught. He has to satisfy the police that he knows nothing of the death of Mervyn's father. He has to stop the hated developer's son from tracking him down. And he has to get rid of the head under the bed.

The story is set in the 1930s in a quiet little New Zealand town, where everyone it seems has a secret. The genteel people are contrasted against their after-dark activities. The amoral Mervyn in this environment is like a cat in a dog's home, bound to cause trouble, although he may really be no worse then the fine upstanding citizens. Cedric is caught in the middle, a weak and indecisive character now forced to fight to keep his freedom.

It is Hayden Frost in his first acting role as Cedric who may be the weak point in the film. He plays the part well but Director Jason Stutter has perhaps pushed the character to the point



that Cedric is almost unconvincing. He has nevertheless done a beautiful job crafting the 1930s feel.
Although Australian comedian Heath Franklin (you may know him better as Chopper) plays his part as Mervyn with great skill his Aussie accent still seems a little out of place with the New Zealand accents of the other actors. There is a lovely cameo appearance by Tim Finn, ex Split Enz, as Cedric's Dad. The best, if briefest, part goes to Jemaine Clements (the quiet menacing Spook) who gets it so right.

Predicament is a great film. The blackmail and murder add just enough tension to keep the story going but the occasional moments of humour break it into manageable chunks.

If you think of New Zealand films in terms of Meet The Feebles and Lord of the Rings then this will surprise you. I loved it.





Primeval Series 4
Roadshow
2 DVD Set
R4 DVD

Primeval is a series which began immensely successful from the outset. It was developed by Impossible Pictures who had made their name making Walking with Dinosaurs. The series used the sci fi concept of anomalies to allow dinosaurs to enter into our world and cause havoc. This idea allowed the used of superb CGI coupled with action packed scripts. The nexus of the series was a tight team which allowed good character development especially in regards to Connor and Abby. As the series developed creatures from the future entered the plot as did individuals from other times. A combination of individual plots and an overarching story made the series even more successful. In the earlier series Nick Cutter the discoverer of the anomalies is haunted by the loss of his wife Helen Cutter through one of the gateways. She becomes the major "nemesis" in the story as she tries to manipulate time to save the natural world from the fate she believes mankind has brought out.

At the end of Season 3 returns to the exact time when evolution transformed our hominoid ancestors into a form which would become man.



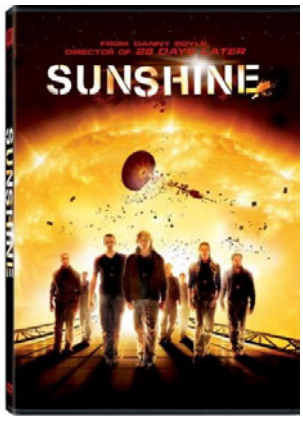
Her aim is to kill the ancestors of mankind and hence save nature from mankind's malicious influence. Helene is killed by a raptor but Connor and Abby are left locked in the past.

As series four opens Connor and Abby has developed a close relationship but are still lost in the distant past. When they find an anomaly device they are able to return to the future and after some confrontations return to their role at the ARC. However things are rather different, there is a new team leader Matt Anderson (Ciarán McMenamin) and the ARC is now a public-private partnership with Philip Burton (Alexander Siddig) being the major source of private funding. As the series unfolds we learn that Ethan, a mentally disturbed killer from the future, is actually Danny's brother Patrick who has been transformed by the anomalies. The truth about the anomalies have become more dire as they learn that they will increase until the world earth is put at risk, perhaps Helen Cutter was right after all. This combination of "creature feature" special effects, good character acting, superb plots and significant themes such as ecology and the environment make this a must watch series. While it is surprising there are only seven episodes in Series Four, Series Five will be released later this year.



Series Four will be released on 5th May by Roadshow Australia presented in a 2 DVD Set.

Sunshine
20th Century Fox
R4 DVD



Sunshine is an intelligent and visceral English science fiction film, directed by Danny Boyle of 28 Days later, this time he explores the world of outer space and mankind's ecological future. Fifty years from now, the sun is dying, and the earth is dying with it. Icarus was sent on a mission to re-ignite the sun but has gone missing and so some years later Icarus II, the earth's final hope, is sent with a crew of eight men and women with a device designed to re-ignite the sun and give the world and all the creatures on it a new chance at life.

As they travel into space interpersonal clashes begin to occur and difficulties arise but it is when they travel past mercury that a true crisis unfolds. They hear a distress beacon and realize it is coming from the original Icarus ship. They debate the merits of diverting their journey by some distance to answer the distress call and while humanitarian considerations come second the fact they make have access to a second nuclear device and hence two chances at re-igniting the sun sways them to divert their trajectory.

As calculations are done manually to achieve this goal a mistake is made which had fatal consequences, the ship is damaged, their food supply destroyed in a fire and their oxygen in running out.

When they find the original Icarus the crew is found to have lost their minds and burnt themselves alive, it seems they became convinced





that the death of the sun is a natural course of events and should not be interfered with. Unknown to the crew of Icarus II the insane captain of Icarus has made it on-board their ship with the express aim of stopping their mission at all costs.

This is a startling film of quite some beauty, the cinematography is superb and creates a mood which saturates the film from the first few minutes to the very end, it is enhances by an excellent soundtrack and faultless special effects. While the CGI is of the highest quality the film itself is focused on character development. You come to know each of the members of the crew through the journey and empathise with their decisions and sacrifices. The final section of the film with the battle between the crew and the insane captain of Icarus is powerful and keeps you right on the edge of your seat. Boyle regularly uses unusual camera angles, strange colour palettes and surreal editing to create a truly unique cinematic experience.



The Experiment
Psychological drama
Sony Pictures Home Entertainment
R4 DVD



This is a remake of the 2001 film Das Experiment, which is in turn based on the novel "Black Box". I have not seen the earlier film but this version is an excellent examination of the psychology of power.

Twenty four people sign up for an experiment that will test how they react in a prison environment. They are warned at the start that the experiment will require that their civil rights be ignored for the duration. They will be paid well, but only if the experiment is completed. Any violence, failure to comply with the rules of the test, or early departure will finish the test and they will not be paid. Something they were not told is that six of them will have the position and authority of prison warders.

Conflict soon pops up with the food being inedible. One of the rules is that all food must be finished at the meal. Prisoner 77 refuses to eat his disgusting meal and the "warders" decide he must be punished commensurately, as the rules allow. Although he is naturally a pacifist he must work out how to fight back. His best friend is the head "warder" and their friendship soon turns to enmity as the warder enjoys the power he now has. As the warders become united and more violent, including the attempted rape of one of the prisoners, the prisoners are left disorganised and victimised. Their only recourse will be physical violence but that will, in theory, end the experiment prematurely and they won't be paid. So the tension continues to build. Prisoner 77 is singled out for special attention as he is still the nominal ringleader, and his one-time friend has completely lost any sense of proportion and is now his main tormenter.



The warders have discovered that they have a lot of power within the rules but the prisoners simply won't unite against them – until one popular prisoner dies after being struck by the head warder. It is a clear case of murder, but still the people who are running the experiment don't stop it.

The film is superbly acted with Adrien Brody and Forest Whitaker leading the cast. Direction is perfect and the tension keeps building with one incident after another. As an example of "power corrupts" it is one of the best. The violence and deep psychological themes have apparently made it hard to sell so the film has gone direct to DVD and BluRay. It is definitely worth watching.





Within The Whirlwind
Human drama
Eagle Entertainment
R4 DVD



Evgenia Ginzburg, a Professor of Literature, wrote a book on her experiences in Stalinist Russia just after the Revolution. She was one of the casualties as Stalin ruthlessly purged the party of "intellectuals" – which meant anyone who might be a challenger to his power. This was a time when Stalin was paranoid about the various versions of Communism and any threat to his personal power. Lenin had the good sense to die before he fell victim to Stalin. Chekov, Trotsky and others were preaching a different kind of Communism and it was an offence punishable by death to be a Chekovist or to fail to denounce a suspect person. The charges were laughable – "conspiracy with a revolutionary group to overthrow the Peoples' Party " and similar nonsense.

It was simply an excuse to purge the Party. The lucky ones were shot, the unlucky ones faced a prison sentence in a work camp in Siberia. Even if they did not have their sentence extended they would still never be allowed back into Russia.

Evgenia fell foul of the Party when one of her students fell under suspicion and was imprisoned as a Chekovist. She was also found guilty of failure to adequately supervise him, suspect him and denounce him. She was sentenced to ten years in a gulag in Siberia.

The cold, brutality and semi-starvation soon told on the prisoners. There were women who showed their worst side in the struggle to survive and others who were too weak to hold up for long. One of these, Lena, became Evgenia's close friend and depended on her support. As the years dragged on Evgenia gradually lost the will to live.

The thought that she would be released after ten years was gradually replaced by the conviction that her sentence, like so many others', would simply be extended. The final blow was when a letter arrived telling her that her husband had been arrested and had died in the cells and her daughter had been sent to an orphanage in Leningrad where she had died in a German attack. Evgenia completely lost the will to live.



She was saved by the camp doctor, a German prisoner. He managed to lift her spirits again and convinced her to look forward to her release – after all, her "crime" was such a mild one and couldn't justify an extended sentence. Unfortunately there were others who were not as lucky and Evgenia once again found herself supporting the weak ones, but now she herself had support from the doctor.

Although there are some elements of a love story this film is not another Doctor Zhivago. It is a story of survival under the inhuman conditions of the gulag. The film has been shot in subdued colour, creating a gloomy atmosphere for the grim prison life. Emily Watson as Evgenia is a strong actress and carries the story well. She is by no means glamorous, which is a nice change from traditional depiction of heroines.

Her depiction shows that Evgenia's survival is entirely due to her internal strength and has nothing to do with any belief in a deity. Thankfully there seems to be no careful sanitising of the nasty bits either. This makes the film far more realistic than most offerings of this type. It is well worth watching.

The Chainsaw Sally Show
Comedy / Horror
Troma
International
R1 DVD



According to the introduction by Lloyd Kaufman of Troma this series was designed to be a TV show that didn't show because of its content. I can't understand their reluctance to take it on. It has all you could want in a good show – lots of blood and guts, torture, cannibalism, chicks in tight T-shirts and short skirts, and sheep molesting. Perhaps they were put off by the fairly ordinary acting, the crap plots, or the dreadful theme song? But then, what would you expect from Troma? Mary Poppins?

Sally lives in Porterville, a quiet rural town, and looks after her retarded brother Ruby. Every now and then they will kill one of the locals for food, or just for fun. Sometimes Sally will let Ruby play with his food before he kills it. Sally gets a job managing the local library (by killing the obnoxious and officious previous manager) and forms a friendship with the part time worker, a girl named Poe. Poe is being picked on by some of the other schoolgirls and Sally sets out to do something about it for her.

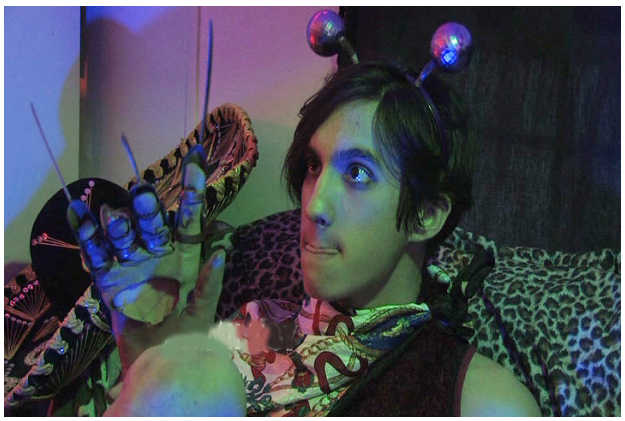
Gradually the undesirables in the town go into the fridge to keep Sally and her brother in food. As well as the library manager she kills the schoolgirls, a sheep farmer who is VERY friendly with his sheep, and anyone else who gets in her way or seems to be undesirable. This includes the girl scout who sells her a box of peanut butter cookies instead of the mint flavour



that she ordered. One by one she is cleaning up the town, but the disappearances have been noticed. A visitor to town is a real estate developer who wants to know what happened to one of his employees. They start to close in on Sally, who is so far beneath suspicion because of her daytime disguise of a meek mild mannered librarian. It is onlt at night that the real Sally shows.

Apart from the problems noted above, the film has all the values for which Troma films are well known – that is, none at all. Experienced Troma fans will know exactly what they are getting. The others will get a surprise. Herschell Gordon Lewis gives us an indie slasher film that combines the bloody and the sexy and is funny at the same time. It has well earned the Troma name.









Jackboots on Whitehall
Military Puppet Satire
Entertainment Motion Pictures
Reel DVD
R4 DVD

It's hard to place this film in a particular genre. Satire, definitely, because it lampoons the American revisionism of history. It also satirises those great British characters like the rough but honest farm workers, the village vicar and the pretty farmgirl. It also manages a passing swipe at the French, Indians, Americans, Scots and even Australians.

No famous historical character is safe – Churchill is a cigar chomping defeatist, Montgomery has a massive overbite and can't stop grinning foolishly, and Hitler likes to wear Queen Elizabeth 1's dresses. The war genre? It could fit in here but you are too busy laughing to regard it as war. It's more like a lampooning of a John Wayne film. Drama? No, not when you can see every joke coming a mile off.

Perhaps the classification is given away at the start of the film. It is, we are told, "Filmed in Panzervision" and behind the titles are comic book panels with caricature Germans being killed by caricature British. Speech balloons feature immortal lines like "Englander schweinhund" and, of course, "Gott in Himmel". That fairly adequately describes the film – an animated comic book with touches of Thunderbirds are Go and The Goon Show. If you have seen the irreverent Team America you will get the idea. The animatronic puppets are perfect for setting the scene. Live actors just wouldn't do.

It is let down a little by a plot that just doesn't deliver enough jokes to fill the couple of hours that the film takes. Compress it by thirty minutes and it would work better. Still, it is the McHenry Brothers' first feature and on the strength of it we are going to see a lot more of their work in the future.







The plot is simple. The British are being massacred at Dunkirk. The Luftwaffe has not shot down al the British fighters. Hitler decides the best way to invade England is by digging a tunnel under the English Channel and coming up in London.

This way they can conquer England from within and capture Churchill without all that messy boat stuff. They complete the tunnel in a couple of days. Churchill has no forces left except for a small group of loyal Punjabi guards so he has no option but to retreat north to Hadrians Wall on the Scottish border.

The hero Chris (voiced by Ewan McGregor) rescues Churchill and his men in an old steam traction engine and they race desperately for the border at about three miles an hour. The Germans, who have zeppelins and plenty of aircraft, apparently don't notice this. They attack when they find out Churchill is at the Wall. The small remaining force of English, Punjabis and Americans are helped by an unlikely ally – the Scots, led by Braveheart, who are pissed off by the way they were depicted in the Mel Gibson film.

Even if it was a bit too long I loved the film. The animation scenes looked deliberately fake, the script was delightfully corney and the characters were lampooned mercilessly. There were enough one-liners to make up for the lack of better gags. If we are going to put up with revised history this is the way it should be done.





Louise-Michel
Crime comedy
France
Pinnacle Films
R4 DVD

French with English subtitles



Once again we turn to France for a delightful black comedy about murder and revenge. Louise, a woman who is almost illiterate and is sensitive about it, works at a clothing factory in Normandy. She got this job after doing fifteen years in prison for murder and, simple or not, she has a certain toughness about her. It's not much of a job at the clothing factory but it keeps her going while she tries to improve herself and learn to read.

The factory manager, Flambert, is taking a "commission" from her pay. She must also cooperate with him to fulfil his very odd sexual fantasy. Louise is definitely one of life's victims. Life turns cruelly on her again when the factory closes without notice. Then her apartment is demolished – there were plenty of warnings posted up and advertised but she just couldn't read them.

She and the other factory women have a meeting to decide what to do. There are various suggestions such as opening a pizza shop, but Louise proposes pooling their redundancy money and hiring a hitman to kill Flambert. This idea appeals to the women and Louise sets about looking for a suitable killer. She finds Michel, a seedy little man who lives in a fantasy world where he is a Security Consultant. He talks a good story and has a great collection of guns.



He is so inept at killing that he has to contract out the work to people who don't have long to live and would like a few Euros to ease their last months. This includes his own sister. He would be amoral and self-serving if he wasn't so pathetic at it.

The factory was just a branch of a multinational so tracking down the real owner is difficult, but Louise will not give up. The trail leads them from Normandy to Brussels to the island of Jersey.

Yolande Moreau plays a brilliant role as the simple and uneducated Louise, with Bouli Lanners as the bumbling Michel ably supporting her. Although the murders they are planning are a fairly antisocial action you just can't condemn them for it. Our sympathies are definitely with the underdog against the rich capitalists.

It is worth watching the film right through the titles as there is just a little more of the film tacked on at the end.





Subdivision
Australian Comedy
Disney
R4



First there was The Castle, a nice little film about typical Australians fighting off big corporations. It verged on caricature (although not as much as Crocodile Dundee) and has now become something of a cult film. If you liked The Castle you will love Subdivision. Aussies at work and at the football, a casual pace of life with quite a lot of beer involved, and a conflict between youth and its elders.

Set in the Queensland town of Hervey Bay the film revolves around Digger Kelly (Gary Sweet), a long-time house builder. He is old school, meticulous, thorough and dedicated to his work. Unfortunately he sticks to the old, slow ways at a time of change. His son Jack would like to update their methods but Digger, who has all the tact of a charging bull, won't have it. The local builders get their work from property developer and salesman Harry McKee (it's good to see Steve Bisley on film again). Harry has also failed to keep abreast of the times – he still designs houses with one bathroom, even for families with four kids. It can't last.

Following yet another blow-up with Digger, young Jack decides to go out on his own. He couldn't pick a worse time. Attracted by the undeveloped nature of the area and the lack of real competition, a large southern firm, SeaBrix, moves in. They offer more modern homes at lower prices. They build houses with more than one bathroom. In charge is Tiffany (Brooke Satchwell). Jack pursues her and the two become friends although Tiffany seems more amused by Jack's attempts to woo her. Jack also takes the opportunity to look at some of SeaBrix's confidential information about costs and suppliers.

Then the axe falls. With SeaBrix taking so much of Harry's work he goes insolvent. Digger, who is waiting for progress payments for the houses he was building for Harry, looks like going broke as well. All his men will also be unemployed and broke and at least one will lose his home. Is there a way out of this? There is, but it will involve cooperation between the old and the young, the big and the small. Will Digger be able to adjust to this?

The basic story is one that has occurred around Australia. It is a disaster for the people and the towns involved and the film brings this out well. The film is lightened by the frequent flashes of humour, though, so it rarely gets too heavy. For instance I loved the scene in the hospital where Jack is "helping" Digger's daughter through childbirth. He encourages her like he is coaching his football team, screaming instructions and encouragement at her at a range of a few feet. The final whale watching scene of the film is a beauty and worth waiting for.

By international standards the film is probably not great cinema but as a really feelgood film it gets top marks. Its initial cinema release fell flat, partly due to the writings of critics who wanted something with more depth. It is not intended to be deep, apart from the problem of little businesses being forced to the wall. It's just a good bit of entertainment and I loved it. Now it is to be released on DVD I think it will find a place in Australian cult cinema alongside The Castle.









Alien vs. Ninja
Madman
R4 DVD



Japanese with English subtitles

When it comes to schlock the Americans are not the only contenders. This Japanese film has all the requisite bits for a monster movie – lots of detached body parts, clashing of cutlery, gore galore and man-in-rubber-suit monsters. We also have a gorgeous girl ninja who makes black leather look better than it ever looked on the cow.

The plot is about as basic as they come. Alien predators comes to earth to breed, meet bunch of ninjas, fighting follows. The rest of the film seems to be just an extended battle with the monsters. The acting is crude and stylised, the characters are pretty ordinary and undeveloped and the compulsory fat guy comic relief is hopelessly overdone.



So why did I love the film? Perhaps because it is so overdone. It's a film worthy of Roger Corman on his best days, although he would have worked in some bikini girls as well. Somehow. It's the sheer bravery of trying to blend two genres and so totally failing that gives the film its appeal. It's a great laugh and well worth watching if only for the leather-clad girl.

Aphrodisiac !
The Sexual Secret of Marijuana
Documentary / Dramatisation
Impulse Pictures / Synapse
R1 DVD



Americans seem to have a strange hang-up about sex. It is a perfectly normal function but it is either hidden or, in the case of pornography, actively suppressed. I can remember early U.S. TV shows in Australia (like the Dick Van Dyke Show) where a married couple had chaste single beds. There was never any suggestion that they would occasionally







jump into bed together, even though they somehow had a son. Since virgin births have gone out of fashion I can only assume that they hired a Mexican illegal immigrant to do the deed.

While most European countries just got on with it, indeed revelled in it, the Americans would rather have a panel show to discuss it. The documentaries shown to schoolkids about sexual diseases, teenage pregnancies and the evils of drug taking should have scared the kids into behaving. With hang-ups like this ingrained into the young people it is no wonder they went to war so often – perhaps just to spice up their otherwise boring little lives. Yet these were the days of massive acceptable drugtaking. There was “mother’s little helper” – valium – and a massive cigarette and alcohol market. Americans remained a little ambivalent about drugs like marijuana but as more young people tried it they started to try to control it. After all, if young people enjoyed it then it must be sinful.

On the other hand there were some proven uses for marijuana in the medical field. This film explores another area where marijuana could supposedly help – sexual performance. The way they present it is hilarious. The film is really a few mild porno clips (“dramatisations”) joined together by a surprisingly interesting history of marijuana use, abuse and control. Some of the claims made are simply ridiculous. Marijuana may be helpful to cure diseases like homosexuality, lesbianism and frigidity. Marijuana use can make a girl more willing to have sex before marriage and therefore, it is implied, cure virginity. It can turn a modest sex-shy young girl into a raging nympho. It can improve your sex life by giving you more, longer climaxes.



In an attempt to provide some sort of balance we have stern-looking men warning us against the evils of marijuana use, but we also get statistics showing that alcohol is responsible for more diseases and deaths than marijuana.

We also see how to prepare marijuana for use in pot brownies, marijuana-filled biscuits. Just in case you are new to the field there are also demonstrations of how to prepare a joint, and even a joint-rolling machine.

The film has to be intended as a tongue-in-cheek spoof, because I can’t imagine how some of it could be taken seriously. The general impression is that stoners were a mentally deficient lot. The tame porn clips seem to be decorative rather than part of the plot. They were removed when the film was first issued on home videotape even though they were pretty inoffensive. For this rerelease Impulse has found a copy of the full original film. It shows its age but is still a fascinating view of changing attitudes to marijuana over the years.

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Lala Pipo – "A Lot of People"
Erotic Comedy
Third Window Films
R2 DVD



Japanese with English subtitles

Lala Pipo is a truly strange film from Japan. Japanese directors (in this case Masayuki Miyano) seem to favour a comic-book look to this sort of film and it suits their work quite well. I can't imagine any other way that the mix of stories could be credibly made into a film otherwise.

The film starts out well enough. Kenji is a slick amoral young procurer of girls for erotic bars (he calls himself a talent scout), He "manages" them, and makes a fair living from it. He has just met a naïve young girl, Tomoko, who is overcome by his charms and sees his offer of erotic work as an escape from a deadend job. His ultimate aim is to groom the girls for the porno film industry. He also has a good sex life with the girls in the meantime. In the flat below lives Hiroshi, a lonely, overweight young man who has no sex life apart from listening to what's going on in the flat upstairs and masturbating. His penis is tired of the daily masturbation and tells him to get a girlfriend. The penis, incidentally, is represented by a green fluffy toy-like creature.

He takes his penis's advice and meets the chubby Sayuri who sees him as a kindred lonely type like her. Hiroshi is offended by the comparison and beats her up (after having sex), but they both want more of each other. Sayuri already has a job in specialist porn films and eventually Hiroshi joins her. They film a whole



series of fat girl / ugly guy films that are a big hit.

Tomoko's mother makes an appearance. She has burnt her house to the ground with her senile parent inside. The shameless Kenji hires her for porno film work and, not knowing of the family connection, accidentally sends her and Tomoko independently to the same studio to make a lesbian porn film.

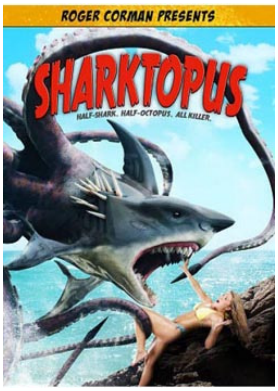
Still with me? The last character in this weird mix is Koichi, a young man who lives in a fantasy world where he thinks he is an intergalactic superhero sent to earth to see if there is anything worth saving. He wears a leather suit with a penis cover like a miniature skyscraper. One day his imagined radio transmissions to the orbiting spaceship "Station" are received and answered.

The individual stories interweave and cross paths occasionally. Sometimes the characters get what they want, sometimes they are punished. You will often find yourself trying to work out just what is going on. Despite this, it is hilariously funny. The humour is erotic, incongruous and often subtle. The erotic scenes are done as much for fun as for erotic content, and are rather tasteful. The cinematography is great and the storyline is really out of this world. It's an incredibly strange mix and really funny. I loved every minute of it.





Sharktopus
Monster movie
Anchor Bay Entertainment
R4 DVD



Roger and Julie Corman present us with another B-grade monster film featuring an improbable half-shark half-octopus, lots of screaming women and plenty of bikinis. Director Declan O'Brian has got the feel of Corman films perfectly and he has made a film that technically is as good as you could want. How he did this given the plot and the monster escapes me.

The monster can walk on land, breathe air and do everything but tapdance. The creature, dubbed S 11, is the product of the traditional evil geneticist scientist working for the military. We are not told what happened to S 1 through to S 10. It is bulletproof, can solve problems, and kills for fun. It kills by stabbing people with its tentacles or simply eating them. As usual it is out of control. The hero who will have to save the day is an ex-employee of the genetics company who has developed ethics and also has the hots for the boss's daughter. We see a lot of his bare chest. There are elements of many recent monster movies like Megapiranha and Dinoshark.

The film has some hilarious moments. We discover the dangers of bungee jumping over an ocean inhabited by a monster, and one of the best moments is when the Sharktopus decides to snack on a truly dreadful group of entertainers. You can tell when the Sharktopus is about to make an appearance – there is the usual group of young louts of jetskis, the aforementioned bungee jumpers, the lone bikini-clad girl on the beach, the isolated fishing boat. You know they are about to die. The plot is that obvious. So why did I enjoy the film so much?





I have seen many monster movies in the last year. The genre is going through a revival at present and there is a lot of very ordinary conventional films being produced. Sharktopus is, if this is the right expression, a high-quality B movie. It has the traditional Corman feel that is more professional than most of the low budget productions. Corman's experience shows here – he has been making this type of film for decades so he knows how to make the most out of each dollar and Declan O'Brian is just as good at it. He squeezes in many action shots that keep the film moving, some great scenery (a lot of it in bikinis), and top class CGI. There is a certain bizarre pleasure in knowing what's coming next. It is not terror as such, just entertaining and very, very funny.



Stonehenge Apocalypse
Anchor Bay Entertainment
R4 DVD



I love conspiracy theory films. It's the way they can ignore reality and dismiss any rational argument with "Well, they would say that, wouldn't they?". The theories usually involve the Government, the military, and / or Men In Black.

New Age is also an old favourite. I just can't understand how a race that could make an intercontinental grid of energy lines couldn't make a decent knife. No, priests had to cut the hearts out of their human sacrifices with chipped obsidian blades. There are always completely irrational reasons for huge structures like the Pyramids or Stonehenge.

When challenged to provide evidence of alien origin or technology the query is dismissed with "There are forces at play here that we don't understand". Yes, that cliché is in the film. The option of large numbers of men working for many years is casually dismissed. Pseudoscience abounds. Scientific errors are many. The New Age theories have more holes than a rabbit warren.

When they all meet, as in this film, you have an absolute comedy of the improbable.

Stonehenge is waking up and causing electro-





magnetic pulses that are kindling volcanoes wherever there is a pyramid in the world. Jacob Blazer, once a respected prodigy scientist, is now regarded as a crackpot by the scientific community. He believes that there is something out there that is not of human origin and runs a radio segment that attracts other loonies. Of course, you know he is going to be proved right in the end – it's that sort of movie.

He heads off for Stonehenge, which is cordoned off by the military, and gets inside the cordon with ridiculous ease by simply walking through the woods. He is of course picked up by the people who are examining the activity at the Henge. The military doesn't care about his theories and the scientists still regard him as a crackpot until they examine a map he is carrying linking pyramids and other sites to "lines of force".

One by one these sites start to erupt with each pulse from Stonehenge. Suddenly some of the





scientists take an interest. Blazer can't explain what the Henge is doing and he falls back on that time-honoured New Age cliché phrase "It's a highly complex device that transcends our knowledge of physics". Eventually, though he guesses that the Stonehenge machine is actually terraforming the planet. This will, naturally, wipe out all life on earth as such supermachines always do.

The military's reaction is predictable. "This requires a global military response" so they prepare to nuke Stonehenge. Since this will pump a massive amount of energy into the system it will probably speed up the coming Apocalypse, not stop it.





Meanwhile in the U.S. state of Maine a friend of Blazer is also aware of the impending cataclysm. He has gathered a group of disciples and they will take shelter in a giant pyramid that will appear from out of the ground, according to the ancient writings. He needs to obtain a relic called the Antikythera device from a museum conveniently located nearby. It was believed to be a very precise ancient calendar but he now knows it is the key that can turn Stonehenge off. Blazer guesses this as well so it is a race to get the key and turn Stonehenge off – or on.

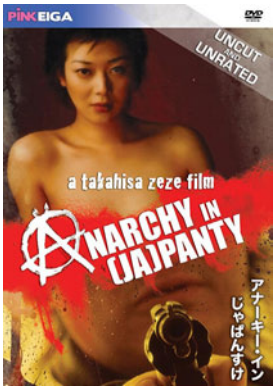
Will the earth survive? Will scientists finally accept that they don't know everything and the Wisdom of the Ancients is the way to go? Will I stop laughing long enough to write this review?

The effects range from pretty good to woeful. Nitpickers will have a field day. My favourite is the scene where the heroine is shot in the shoulder and Blazer puts a tourniquet around her arm. This will do nothing to stop her blood loss and she will probably get gangrene in the arm as well. BUT. The film is still huge fun. It's fast-moving and spectacular. Ignore the New Agers, caricature military and cast of looneys. Enjoy it for what it is – a great piece of entertainment.





Anarchy in (Ja)Panty
Japanese with English subtitles
Pink Eiga
R1 DVD



Eiga is a genre that parallels the "blue movie" style of early erotica. In this case we have the compulsory sex scenes combined in a plot that is intelligent and thoughtful.

Mizuki, an aspiring actress, has found that she is infertile. She kidnaps a baby boy and brings him up as her own child and calls him Yoshiki. She is becoming irresponsible in her behaviour and after eight years has taught Yoshiki to shoplift. She makes a living of sorts as a prostitute. She is now shacked up with a loser boyfriend Tatsutoshi. It is no wonder that Yoshiki is growing up to be a hoodlum. The bereft parents have now adopted a little girl to replace their stolen son. The two are destined to meet.

Eventually Yoshiki finds out the truth about his background and takes his revenge but not before we are treated to a parade of seriously kinky sex scenes, rape and murder. We can feel a certain sympathy for Yoshiki, brought up by a vacuous slut of a mother and her drunken, good-for-nothing boyfriend. Yoshiki could have done





so much better but his twisted family environment has kept him down. Unfortunately we can't feel any sympathy for the collection of drunks, rapists and general sleazeballs around++.

Yoshiki's story makes the film more than just erotica. In many ways it is more like the U.S. productions of the 1970s where plot was at least as important as getting your gear off.

The film is a good example of the Eiga genre, nicely made and entertaining.

Extreme Sleaze Showcase Part III
Vintage Erotica
After Hours Cinema
All Region DVD



This is another collection of "loops" by 42nd Street Pete, a collector and researcher of early pornography. A loop was a short one-reeler sex film that ran in peepshow machines and Pete has collected some of the worst in this compilation. While many early porn films (now they are just quaint erotica) ran in peepshow after peepshow, Pete has concentrated on those used in Peepland.

This was a sleazy arcade on New York's 42nd Street, centre of such grindhouse cinemas and arcades. It was finally closed in 2003. Pete says they specialised in "weird, twisted … sh*t porn".

The loops are all of low quality and poor content. Although the "money shot" had not yet become the directors' goal, genital close-ups and



penetration were compulsory. Most of the girls have that slightly overweight look. Only the scenery seemed to change. Even the clip of Vanessa del Rio and the Filipino dwarf is really very conventional.

With the growth of home video machines and the transfer of much erotica to them, there was a need in the peepshow arcades to produce content that competed. To do this they moved into sexual themes that ranged from sleazy to downright evil. Pete has examples of all of them here. Plots such as they were involved rape, bondage, nuns, baked goods, Sado Masochism lesbian acts, transvestites and dwarves – all subjects too strong for home video. I will never look at Kraft's Miracle Whip again without remembering the "lunch" scene. Interestingly Pete is able to show how some of these themes continue today. There are specialist companies producing entire series based on a particular theme such as lesbian bondage. Pete, of course, has these in his collection as well.

Thankfully even Pete has a certain amount of taste and doesn't show the bestiality films in his collection. It is hard to imagine people being attracted to this sort of sleaze, but they must have been as the producers kept making it.



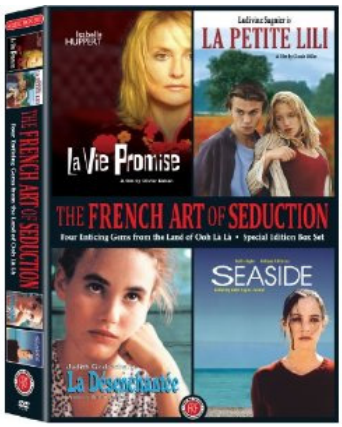
Pete introduces each loop with details of its content, age and artistic merits (if any). Despite the digital restoration the originals were obviously in bad or well-worn condition and the clips shown here are mostly of pretty poor quality. Unless you are that way inclined the films have little interest apart from their historic context, but, like much of Pete's library, its place in the world of cinema cannot be denied. They were an excessive overreaction to the relaxing of censorship and the easing of morality as the world entered the 70s. Sleaze, yes. Historical interest, definitely.

Brand new telecine from the original vintage 8mm film! Aspect ratio 1.33:1

DVD Contents

The "Peepland" loops
After Hours Cinema Trailer Vault
Postcard with liner notes by grindhouse personality 42nd Street Pete

The French Art of Seduction
First Run Features
R1 DVD Set



French with English subtitles

This collection of four French films has nothing to do with seduction. What you get is a couple of beautifully made films and a couple of less effective ones, each dealing with the problems of love and human relationships in a different way. We see it through the eyes of different directors.

La Petite Lili

There is not much seduction in this film, in fact the closest we get is Lili (played by the lovely Ludivine Sagnier) in a brief, tasteful nude scene at the start of the film.



What we get is a nice story about ambition, love and changing priorities.

Lili is a country girl in love with Julien, a young would-be film maker who lives at his mother's chateau. Julien's mother Mado is a fading starlet but her boyfriend Brice still casts her in his films. Lili wants fame and fortune like Mado. Julien and Mado do not get on with each other so when Julien shows shorts of his proposed film starring Lili, Mado is scathing. Maybe she just can't handle the youthful aspects of his work, maybe she is jealous of Lili's appearance and acting ability in the film. Julien is broken by her rejection – it seems that getting his mother's approval of his work is his greatest challenge – but Brice tells Julien he must just keep trying because success or its lack is a part of Julien, part of being a great filmmaker.

Lili meanwhile sees Brice as a chance to get into the industry as an actress. When he leaves Lili goes with him, following a brief flirtation.

Four years later Lili and Julien meet again. Lili's life seems to be going well and Julien has just got funding for a new film. The film is about those last days at Mado's chateau. Lili desperately wants to play herself in the film but things have moved on. Julien is married with a young child. What happens now?

The film is one of those that film critics love to pull apart, discuss exhaustively and pass judgment. It is, after all, based loosely on a story by Chekov. I, however , watch films for pleasure and La Petit Lili is good entertainment. It has that rather indefinable something that so many good French films have. It may be a product of good acting, beautifully photographed scenery and superb acting. Whatever it is, it lifts this story well above the average.


Ludivine Sagnier as seen in "La Petite Lili," a film by Claude Miller
A First Run Features Release


Ludivine Sagnier and Robinson Stévenin as seen in
"La Petite Lili," a film by Claude Miller
A First Run Features Release

La Vie Promise (The Promised Life)



A film with absolutely no seduction in it at all, but a sensitive plot and superb acting. Silvia is a rather worn out prostitute who has had a tragic past. She had a daughter and fell pregnant again, but just before the birth of her son she had a nervous breakdown. While in the asylum she managed to forget a lot of her past, her husband and her children. Now her fourteen year old



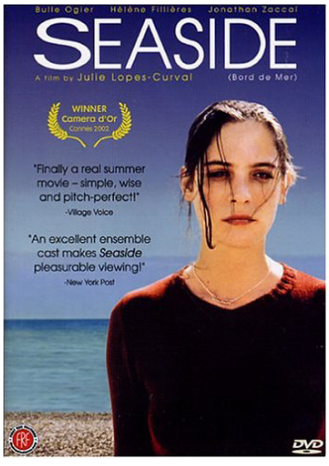


daughter Laurence has skipped from foster care and made contact with her.

At first Sylvia rejects the girl but then relents, not wanting to see Laurence make the same mess of her life that Sylvia has. Laurence has walked away after stabbing Sylvia's pimp and now Sylvia must find her to re-establish contact. The two must evade the police as well. With the help of a car thief, Joshua, who is also on the run for who-knows-what, they make their way back to Sylvia's home town. She hopes to find refuge with her ex-husband. Bit by bit in the familiar surroundings her memory returns. Meanwhile Sylvia and Joshua are becoming closer and Laurence is beginning to see him as a father figure.

This is another superbly acted film. The attractive Isabelle Huppart as the middle aged Sylvia is simply brilliant, but Pascal Greggory gives a powerful and restrained performance as Joshua. Unlike Huppart who must show a wide range of emotions, Greggory provides a solid trustworthy foundation for the two women to base their new lives on. No seduction, just great acting and a powerful script.

Seaside



Like the previous films in this compilation this film contains no hint of seduction. That is a pity because it desperately needs something to spice it up.

It is set in a dreary little French beach



village and we get a slice of life of some of its dreary occupants. The "beach" is simply an expanse of pebbles – no sand, no waves. The pebbles are mined by a local firm and sold to the ceramics industry. It is the only industry left in town and working there, sorting rocks all day, is about as mind numbing a job as you could imagine.

The characters in the film are as dreary as the job. Many are related in some way and all they seem to have in common is a absolute lack of determination to leave the dying village and seek a future elsewhere. It's not so much that they are unhappy in the village, but that they seem to have been flattened under the life of stultifying boredom.

The only mild excitement is when a shark is seen in the bay and the beach is closed. The shark sees how dreary it all is, then leaves. I don't blame it, but I would like to have seen it eat a few of the characters first.

One interesting character stands out in the general mediocrity. Rose, part of the family that once owned the pebble factory, is a compulsive gambler and there are occasional fun moments watching the family trying to keep her out of the



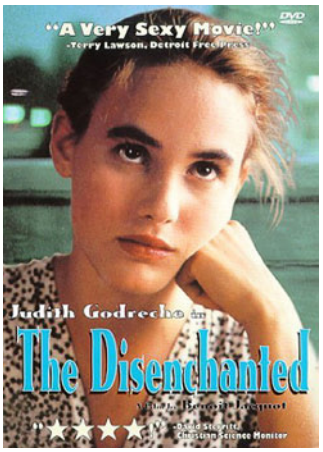


casino. Her compulsion is not funny, but trying to get her away from the slot machines is. It is not enough to save the film from being, simply, boring.

Even the cinematography makes the village look dreary – muted colours, leaden sea, and the heaps of pebbles. Some directors can use the soft French light to enhance a film but here it just seems to flatten everything. Apart from a brief flash of nudity there is not a hint of sexuality to brighten the film. The film won a Camera d'Or at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival but after the previous films in the compilation it was, to me anyway, a huge dreary disappointment.

La Desenchantee (The Disenchanted)

I had high hopes for this film, since it starts the lovely Judith Godreche. I was disappointed. First, the insubstantial plot offers nothing much for her to display her talents. She plays Beth, a young student who is challenged by her violent and selfish boyfriend to show her love for him by having sex with the ugliest man she can find. Huh? It's not much of a hook to hang a plot on and director Benoit Jacquot completely wastes what plot there is. There is no hint of seduction or even mild excitement.



Beth forms a relationship with a writer, who discusses poetry with her. Her mother's doctor, known to the family as SugarDad, is supplying them with a little money to exist on. He offers more, but Beth knows there will be conditions involving sex with him. So does her mother, who seems quite happy to see her in a moneymaking sexual relationship. Beth has only one friend, Chang, a fellow student. We only get brief moments with some of the characters so they are left undeveloped.

Beth herself spends a lot of time looking wistful, but she seems to be a bit of an airhead so it is hard to sympathise with her troubles. Perhaps this could have been corrected if we could learn more about her but without knowing her we can't really like her. The only character who seems to develop a personality is Beth's younger brother who is shown as being mature beyond his age.

It is nicely filmed but without at least half a plot it just doesn't work for me. It was Jacquot's first film so I can make some excuses for his lack of experience. It's just that the plot is so pointless and he didn't do anything with what there was of it.





Love Kittens
Vintage "Sexy Classics"
First Run Features
R1 DVD



This selection of four films from the early sixties shows the changing attitude to nudity in film, especially those made for the U.S. Films from Europe were regarded as "artistic" and could feature gratuitous nudity. They were generally a lot of fun, but didn't always appeal to the mass audiences. Producers decided they could make a product that would have wider appeal. Generally they would insist on a big name actress as a drawcard, such as Elke Sommer, and those actresses are the focus of these films. They mark the introduction of nudity to mainstream film but still retain a curiously traditional look.

It was an adventurous move especially in the U.S. as it required guts for producers to ignore the moral outbursts that would follow the licentious scenes of (shock, horror) kissing, smoking and dancing among the younger set. They had to be toned down a bit from the European style to fit into the U.S. markets and even then the U.S distributors demanded the right to do a final cut. It didn't always work. They often finished up producing a film that looked more like one of those pompous British films of the immediate pre-War period. In these we are expected to believe that a fifty year old David Niven was really a suave sophisticated man about. town who could pull all the thirty-something "young" ladies. They also produced films that, despite their intentions, still looked French (or Italian or whatever) as they couldn't afford to ignore the local audiences.

Sweet Ecstasy

Billed as "steamy beach romance" the film deals with a group of rich, spoilt young people on the Riviera. Into this group comes a young(ish) man who soon has to choose between a vivacious young woman from the group and his actress fiancée.

Apart from lots of women in tight clothes and a "Mexican costume party" this film has little to recommend it. I saw it when it was released (mostly because it had Elke Sommer in it) and it seemed a bit dated even then. It was not so much sexy as naïve compared to what we were becoming used to in Australia, but in the more retarded U.S. it was sexy enough to sell.

In spite of Elke Sommer this turkey doesn't fly, though, because it is simply a dreadful film with a weird plot, stilted script, tedious music, bad acting and unbelievable characters. It has fortunately been overdubbed in English, which helps a bit. So does Elke Sommer, but at this time not for her acting ability.

The exotic locations, attractive young women and a minimum of brain-taxing plot were ideal for the U.S. audiences, especially when combined with a "love kitten" big name star. It was a strange approach as these films seemed to be a step backwards compared with earlier sexier European releases, but they were designed to be inoffensive.

The best comparison I can offer is an adult (older audiences, not dirtier films) version of the old Gidget beach films from 1959.

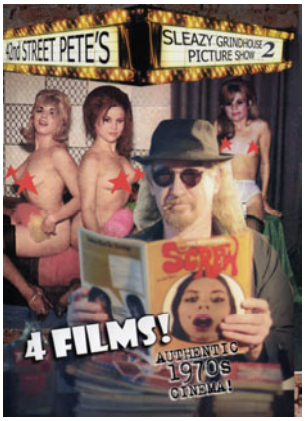
Daniella By Night



It's Elke Sommer again, pouting and looking sultry (or should that be "surly"?) all over the place. This film is in French with subtitles and shows how the Europeans were catering to their own markets. It is a combined German – French production. It involves Elke Sommer as a fashion model working for a leading couturier who is also selling some sort of secrets. She is inadvertently carrying stolen documents in her lipstick.

Without Miss Sommer's name in it the film would have sunk without trace. It has all the characteristics of the most pompous British films mentioned above. Sommer's acting was notably better than in Sweet Ecstasy so it seems she finally had a plot that she could work with.

42nd Street Pete's Sleazy Grindhouse Picture Show 2
Vintage Erotica
After Hours Cinema
R1



Pete has done it again. His library of sleazy films must be incredible and his knowledge of the 42nd Street area is encyclopaedic. This set is a homage to the Harum Theatre on 42nd Street, the only cinema to show Grindhouse films 24 hours a day in the seventies. It managed to survive Mayor Giuliani's cleanup of the 42nd Street theatres and finally closed, according to Pete, around 2000. It showed a set of four films constantly and changed films about twice a week. Pete describes the theatre and its patrons in his excellent introduction and "sleaze" seems to be a mild description. The Harum was probably the last dying gasp of the 42nd Street cinemas as home video started to make serious inroads into their market.

The technical quality of the films is reduced by their constant sessions through the theatre's worn-out projectors. In the comprehensive sleeve notes Pete points out that they could restore the colour and sound, but the films themselves were so full of scratches that there wasn't much that could be done to improve the picture. As he so eloquently puts it, "it just comes down to the fact that you can't shine shit".

In this set Pete offers us four films from the Harum's typical range. By now erotica was changing more towards the porn we know today and the quality had improved dramatically over the early short films. They were longer, in colour and had sound. As we see from these examples the public now expected genital and penetration shots, more attractive actors and actresses, and even lesbian scenes. The "money shot" was coming in but was not yet the obsession that it is with porn filmmakers today.

The films are:
Tattooed Lady 1977: centres around tattoos and their effect on peoples' love life. Are they erotic or not? This is a good example of the cheap



films turned out by using short story link segments to join together separate short clips. This style is still widely used today.

Hawaii Sex-O: 1971 : made in Hawaii, which makes it a big-budget film by the standards of the time. They saved money to pay for the Hawaiian production by cutting back on non-essentials like plot and acting skills. Sex in the surf, kidnapping, lesbian sex, drugs, sex on the sand, murder and an unbelievable plot. What more could you want?

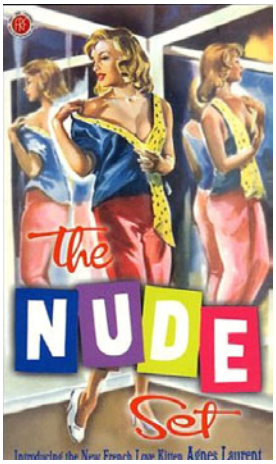
Love Lies Waiting 1974: "Rick Lutze is a cross-dresser in this film, something that appealed to the older trannies in the first four rows of this ….theatre". It deals with the prostitutes in a high-class Beverley Hills brothel. This film is in remarkably good condition and the women are all quite attractive but apart from that it is fairly conventional.

Up at J.J.'s Place: 197? : Black men screwing white women. The films were known as "mixed combos". This was becoming a popular fetish. Maybe the women just got turned on by the Afro hairstyles. The dialogue, as usual, is pathetic but that's not why people went to see these films. The music track is even worse. After the first few minutes of stilted dialogue they get into it and just keep going until the end of the film.



We still, however, have that dreary background music (jazz never seems to suit a film as background music). The best description of the film is “quaint”. We also have a few very brief partial nudity scenes to titillate the viewers. This gave the film a bit of a reputation that probably didn’t harm its take at the box office but audiences would have been disappointed.

The Nude Set



Also known as The Fast Set in areas where “nude” was a dirty word in newspapers, this film starred French love kitten Agnes Laurent. A spoiled young girl, Sophie, goes to Paris to study art and incidentally meet up with her boyfriend, and she discovers the delights of burlesque and striptease nightclubs. There is much licentious dancing and extended striptease scenes. They did not exactly inflame my passions but were fairly raunchy for their time. Inevitably Sophie finishes up as a performer, not just a spectator. There is no nudity by Sophie but what is shown in the strip shows.

The film was done with a touch of relatively unsophisticated comedy that lifted it above films like the previous two. At least the young people looked no more than twenty five. They were obviously rebels, though, as they rode motor scooters and the boyfriend drove a three-wheeler motor car.

Music is by the hilariously named “Moustache and his Rock and Roll” and has as much connection to rock and roll as a bunch of chanting monks.

Agnes Laurent was younger and somewhat more attractive than Elke Sommer and perhaps better fitted the title of Love Kitten. At least she smiled more often.

The Twilight Girls

This time it’s Catherine Deneuve in her first film role who now gets start billing, but she was very young (thirteen at the time) so it’s hard to pick her out. Agnes Laurent gets the Love Kitten role. There is also an appearance by U.S. about-to-be porn starlet Georgina Spelvin. The film was originally titled Les Collegiennes (The School Girls) and was renamed The Twilight Girls for the U.S. market. It was heavily cut with most of Miss Deneuve’s scenes eliminated due to their mild lesbian overtones and replaced with scenes by Georgina Spelvin with far stronger lesbian motifs. This version is taken from the Audubon Films master and with an English overdub and the American inserted scenes. Miss Deneuve is listed in the titles as Sylvie Dorleac, her family name.

The story is the usual “boarding school full of randy girls” and for a change the plot is reasonably intelligent. Young Anne-Marie attracts the attention of one of her classmates and has to decide between her or a young man she has noticed. Her schoolgirl lover is not happy and there are the usual bitchy catfights.

The film is really rather tame. It was the lesbian scenes that had it so heavily cut in the U.S.. Nudity was becoming more tolerated, but they were having none of that girl – girl business. Oddly after the lesbian scenes were cut extra anonymous scenes were inserted of Georgina Spelvin, and other scenes were recut to suggest lesbian activity where it hadn’t existed before.

The entire concept of the girls sleeping topless was part of the U.S. version and gave a chance to flash a bit of breast. According to the extra on the making of the U.S. version these extra scenes “turned the mild puppy love into a cauldron of burning sexual curiosity”. It wasn’t enough, though, and the censors of New York took the film into the court, where it remained for two years. This, of course, ensured its success. A decade later Miss Spelvin appeared in The Devil In Miss Jones. How quickly the attitudes changed 1

None of the films stand out as great cinema but they are important as they show the loosening of the strict morality that prevailed up til then. Bit by bit such films chipped away at the moral restrictions and gradually people were allowed to watch whatever they wanted.

Nikkatsu Roman Porn Trailer Collection
Japanese Cult Erotica
Impulse Pictures
R1



Since World War II pornography was gradually making its way into Japanese film. The films were quite popular and were shown widely, unlike other countries that tried to ban it or at least keep it suppressed through censorship. The Japanese directors were restricted by censorship laws in what they could show. Genitals and even pubic hair were definitely out although rape and torture were allowable. Genitalia could always be hidden by a strategically placed piece of furniture or a prop or simply blotted out by pixelation or a grey oval over the offending parts. They were treated as mainstream cinema and for a time were one of the most popular genres at the theatres. They were known generally as “Pink” films. The style first appeared in the 1960s, made by many small studios. Gradually the films fell into a formula.

According to researchers Donald Richie and Pia Harrittz there were certain basics that a film needed to fall into the genre.

It had a quota of sex scenes, usually about one every ten minutes.
It should last about an hour.
It would be filmed on 16mm or 35mm film
It would be low-budget and usually shot within a week

Within these parameters directors were free to indulge themselves. They usually had a story of sorts to work to and in this they were more like the European filmmakers.

“Roman” porn was an abbreviation of “romantic pornography”, and Nikkatsu was one of the leading producers of the genre from the early 1970s along with Toei. The main difference between Pink films and Roman Porn is that the latter was made by better-funded studios.

The growth of home video in the 80s just about finished off the genre for the small producers. Some of the larger studios like Nikkatsu moved into the area, producing high quality Roman Porn films using better equipment and staff than the small producers could afford.







Although the Roman Porno (or Pink) films are technically porn they fit more into the erotica or at worst soft porn categories. The display of genitalia was still banned but the cinematography was lavish and top-class and the higher production values lifted the films from porn to erotica. The subtlety of this is in sharp contrast with the cruder more vulgar U.S. productions developing at the time. The difference is that the U.S. producers were determined to shock and titillate but the Japanese producers already had an established market with quite sophisticated tastes.

In 1984 stronger censorship laws marked the





death of the genre. Now that porn was sneaking into mainstream theatrical films it was hard to maintain sales. In 1988 “Bed Partner” was Nikkatsu’s final Roman Porn film. They continued to distribute Pink films through a variety of company names but the genre never regained its popularity. Nikkatsu went bankrupt in 1993.

Surprisingly there has been a revival in interest in the Pink genre in the 2000s. Impulse Pictures plans to reissue many of the Nikkatsu films. From the brief examples shown on the DVD the quality will be superb. There are thirty eight trailers, all taken from what looks like the original film masters. There is also a full length short film, Ryoko’s Lesbian Flight. Like so many of these films it doesn’t really deliver what the title suggests. It is the titles of the trailers that show the range covered by Roman porn. In many countries even now the films would be banned just because of the lurid titles. The treatment of women would rouse the feminists into a frenzy.

Titles include Apartment Wife: Afternoon Affair, Coed report: Yoko’s White Breasts, Confidential Report: Prostitute Torture Hell, Female Teacher Hunting (teachers are a popular theme), Nurses Gone Wild (so are nurses); Nympho Diver: G String Festival; Rape!; Rape Me; Sex Hunter and Zoom In: Rape Apartments.

The girls are almost universally attractive and natural looking, the cinematography is tasteful and the plots, though short, are usually reasonably intelligent. It is a pleasant change from the rather crude and genital-obsessed U.S. productions.

Erotic? Definitely. Pornographic? No way. I look forward to seeing the films themselves.

Uncle Farts' '70s Grindhouse Sleazefest
Independent Entertainment
R0 DVD



In the 1970s the porn industry was changing. With the increasing popularity of overseas films like Emmanuelle (1974) the U.S. industry had to change. Mainstream films like Deep Throat (1972) and The Devil in Miss Jones (1973) showed the way. Using the big-movie professional techniques perfected in the U.S. porn could be turned into a full-length feature with a plot and good cinematography and acting. This would produce a higher quality film with its sleazy nature overcome. Many of the actors and actresses came from a grindhouse background. There was big money to be made – if you could find a theatre game to show the films. Most were confined to the late night sessions.

Even the grindhouse industry, the little back street theatres that showed continuous low quality porn shorts, could see the change coming. There was still a market for short porn loops but gradually they started to get longer, incorporate a plot, and be filmed in colour. It was still, however, the last gasp of a dying industry. The home video recorder replaced the grindhouse theatres and the videotape widened the market without the cooperation of the theatres. When every little video shop had a collection of "under the counter" films people could finally choose what they wanted to watch.

The films on this compilation are from that last period of true grindhouse. They are rather poor quality as you would expect from a film that was played regularly, and the plots are laughably silly. Sound was generally non-existent. There is no penetration or "money shot" – yet.





The compilation would have been improved if the films were digitally cleaned up. It would have improved again if the producers cut the pointless and crude Uncle Fart animations that do nothing to introduce the films.

We get four films on the DVD.

Sex Odyssey is a group of remarkably clean shaven cavemen who meet a group of luxuriously unshaven cave women. Guess what happens next? The sound track is very obviously overdubbed with lots of grunts and screaming.

Dionysius: the Greek god comes to earth where he is seduced very thoroughly then killed. He seems to enjoy the experience and comes back for more.

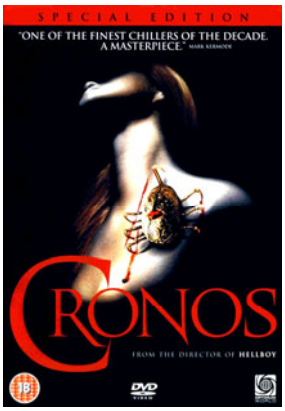
Honky Tonk Nights: a girl wants people to appreciate her for her singing, not for her mammaries.

Satan's Daughter: more of the usual.

The films are not great but they are well representative of the change of emphasis in the industry.



Cronos
Horror
Madman
R4 DVD



Spanish subtitled in English

Guillermo el Toro's first feature film didn't get much attention when it was released in 2003 or 2004. Now it has been reissued we can look at the film and see the talent that has marked his work since. Although on the surface it is a vampire story, del Toro has made it into something of a love story between a grandfather and his niece. In the end he will sacrifice all for her.

The Cronos device was fashioned in the shape of a scarab by a Spanish alchemist who fled the Inquisition to Mexico. The device gives immortality to anyone who uses it properly. The alchemist was killed in an earthquake (immortality can only go so far) and the device, hidden in the base of an archangel statue, has passed into the hands of Jesus Gris. Jesus is an antiques dealer and is looking after his niece. There is a deep bond between the two. When a street thug comes looking in his shop and cuts open the parcel containing the statue Jesus is curious and manages to open the statue and take out the Cronos device. With no idea what it does he is holding the device and pressing various points to open it when metal legs come out and fasten into his skin. A needle then draws a sample of his blood and reinjects it after the device has done … something? The next day he is



feeling better. The aches and pains of old age are disappearing.

The Cronos device is not without side effects. He now has a craving for raw meat and blood.

A dying millionaire, De La Guardia, has a book on the Cronos device and wants it to heal his own diseases. He sends his brutish nephew (the greatly underused Ron Perlman, playing the part well) to recover it at any cost. The nephew beats Jesus to death (he believes) then pushes Jesus in his car off a cliff. Jesus revives in the mortuary but once De La Guardia realises he is alive the nephew goes back to work. Jesus now knows of the vampire side effects. Can he trust himself with his beloved granddaughter? There is only one way out.

Del Toro keeps the story moving along but still finds time for some wonderful character development. Jesus (Federico Lupi) comes across as a gentle, kind old man. It is hard to make someone like this into a vampire, but Del Toro does it without the gore usually associated with vampire films. De La Guardia (Claudio Brook) is played in such a way that I spite of his greed and menace we can see him as another old



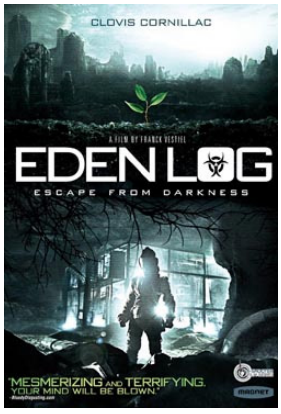




man just desperate to hang onto life. The granddaughter Aurora (Tamara Shanath) only plays a minor role in the film with few speaking parts but her actions show her love for her grandfather.

It is a powerful film that is way past the usual vampire story. Perhaps now, on its second time around, it will get its deserved recognition.

Eden Log
Reel DVD
R4 DVD



French with English subtitles

A man wakes up deep in a cave complex. He doesn't know who he is or where he is. As he tries to get out he finds himself in a huge underground complex, half constructed and half … grown? As he makes his way up towards the surface he finds that strangely he knows how to operate the machinery and computers. The controlling computer recognises him, too, and lets him access



much of the computer's records. He finds he is in a complex called Eden Log, whose purpose and construction remain a mystery. All he knows at first is that the complex is based around a Plant.

The complex is inhabited by dangerous half-humans who are hunting him, and a strange array of people who seem to have some part in the complex. One man has been partly absorbed by the Plant. And always there are the ever-present plant roots growing through the complex from the possibly hostile plant.

As he works his way up towards the surface he picks up clues and what he finds is horrifying. Immigrant and refugee workers can be given citizenship in exchange for looking after the Plant. Then he comes to the Plantation and finds what "looking after the plant" really means. Is the Plant really trying to communicate with him?

This is a hard film to watch. Most of it takes place in semi-darkness with an almost monochrome look. The jerky hand-held camera and flickering lighting do nothing for the film. For his next film perhaps director Franck Vestiel could stretch the budget to rent a tripod. There is no character development and the clues are doled out sparingly until the end. It is the story that makes this film, it and it is truly a grim, dark story.





Idol of Evil:
Hell is Forever
Horror adventure
Rotunda Films /
Chemical Burn
Entertainment
R1 DVD



The plot line sounds pretty conventional. A mythologist is called in by the Vatican to find a missing artifact that in the wrong hands could mean The End Of The World. In this case the artifact is a jewel, the Eye of Kali. If fitted into the eye socket of the skull of a long-dead evil prince it allows the user to read the innermost thoughts of a subject and control them. I am not sure what it is doing in Britain, but an ancient map has turned up that shows where the jewel and the skull are separately buried. Silly ancient priests. They should have smashed the skull and jewel when they beat the evil guy, but decided instead to bury the bits so any passing archaeologist or historian or mythologist could find them with the help of the map they also thoughtfully provided.

There is, of course, a person with evil intentions who wants the skull and jewel. Our mythologist David Hilton must find the artefacts and somehow get them safely to the Vatican priests who will get what information they can then destroy





them. Sure they will.

So far the story is all rather ordinary but then the film itself is a nice surprise. It may have been made on a micro budget but the outside scenes suit this style of film. The very ordinariness of the settings contrasts well with the more ominous moments. It's nice to see a horror film in daylight rather than half gloom. The dark scenes don't appear until the end of the film and by then they are quite appropriate. Here we finally get the horror that the film has been building up to. Until then the in the film is maintained by the group of murderous mercenaries hired to find and recover the artifacts.

Richard Cambridge as the young and sometimes foolish mythologist plays the part well but he is no Indiana Jones, which I think is what the director set out to make of him. The film needed more money to make that work.

Stephanie Elliott as his assistant / girlfriend Lucy also does a good job, without the screaming and carrying on that seem to be de rigeur for this type of film. Overall the film is more restrained than Indiana Jones. It is, though, more entertaining than the run-of-the-mill films of this genre because of that very restraint. It seems far closer to reality.

We are told "David Hilton will return", possibly signalling a series. I hope so.



The Last Exorcism
Horror
Hopscotch
R4 DVD



Not another exorcism film ! Demonic possession has been rather done to death so I had no great hopes for this film. I was wrong. It is possibly the best film of this genre I have seen. That may seem a little strong but the careful development of the plot, the excellent acting and the sinister surroundings all go to make a film that is well out of the ordinary.

The story revolves around the Reverend Cotton Marcus, who has performed over 200 fake exorcisms. To reveal the scams, in which a child has recently died, Cotton will arrange an exorcism for a camera crew who will record everything. On the way to the Deep South and his next case Cotton shares his beliefs with the camera.



He has never experienced a real case of possession. He justifies his lucrative exorcisms by pointing out that the "possession" is often a symptom of a deeper psychological guilt and an exorcism will often relieve the possessed of their guilt. It has worked in the past and he has no doubt it will work in this case as well. Whether Cotton believes in God is left open. The religious aspect of exorcisms is irrelevant – to Cotton it is about money.

The possessed girl, Nell, is normally a nice polite farm girl but she cannot explain her possession. When she is possessed her father finds it necessary to chain her up in the barn. Nell's mother died some years ago and her father has never quite come to grips with her loss – he prayed and prayed but the cancer beat her. Now he is on the verge of questioning his faith.



Cotton carries out his token exorcism ritual complete with lots of shouting and exhortations and prayers. It seems to relieve Nell. Her father joins in the prayers with a will. Her brother, though, is a little reluctant. Perhaps he can see through Cotton's charade.

With Nell "cured", Cotton collects his money and leaves. They stop for the night in a motel a few miles away and during the night Nell turns up, distressed and saying she doesn't want to go back.

The possession is still there but is getting worse. On admission to the hospital they find she is pregnant. Cotton seems to be looking at a case of incest, not possession, but the possession episodes continue.

Her father takes Nell out of the hospital and they go back home. He won't believe she is pregnant. When Cotton finds out he goes back to the farm to check on her welfare. He is starting to care a little about others instead of being



his usual self-centred self. What he sees is dreadful. It seems the local priest has other ways than exorcism of dealing with problems like this.

Patrick Fabian (Cotton) is the strong character who ties it all together, even when his faith in himself is shaken. He plays the confidence trickster well but he is just as good at playing the confused and challenged man when things turn nasty.

I liked Ashley Bell's rendition of Nell – innocent, full of guilt and scared about what's happening to her. She perfectly counterbalances Cotton in his brash self-confidence. She may be fairly new to acting but there is a good future ahead of her.

In some ways this is a nasty film, but in all ways it is a strong story, well directed, and a credit to all who worked on it.



Legend of the Bog
Horror / thriller
Ireland
Peacock Films
R4 DVD



I had great hopes of this film, largely because of Vinnie Jones. I haven't seen him in a bad role yet. This budget film, however, fails to do much with him. This is a pity because there are areas where a stronger character is needed. The plot is not bad but underdeveloped. The characters are generally stereotypes and Jones is the only one who stands out above the general mediocrity. Even so, it was still an entertaining film. Why?

"Bog People" is the general name given to the 3,000-year-old bodies being dug up from ancient bogs as development spreads. The bodies are mostly found in the bogs of Ireland and Denmark. One of the characters is a young Professor of Forensic Anthropology and at the start of the film he is explaining the Bog People to a group of students. He points out that they were often killed and sunk in the bogs along the boundaries between the Celtic tribes. In the Celtic beliefs this has left them trapped between Life and the Underworld. Were they sacrifices, criminals or captives? As more bodies are discovered the scientists will learn more about them. He is therefore keen to examine Irish Bog bodies as they are found and sets out with one of the students who is detailed to drive him around. She is, of course, an attractive young woman.

We cut to a building site where an American





woman (stereotypically brash, rude and pushy) is inspecting the progress of the development she is funding. A bog body has been discovered by the workmen but she can't spare the time to have the site crawling with police or anthropologists, so she orders the body dumped into a stream. The fresh water revives the bog man who now sets out for revenge.

Through various coincidences the professor and his driver, the rich American woman and her taxi driver, and a pair of young women all get lost in the forest around the bogs. Lost and with night approaching they all finish up at a lonely cottage. The cottage is the home of Vinnie Jones who plays a hunter of Bog People. He introduces himself only as Mr Hunter. A rejuvenated Bog Man once attacked his partner and he had to shoot the man to put him out of his pain. He also killed the Bog Man and now hunts them. He admits to having killed at least two others as well. The lights in the cottage will have attracted them if there are any around so he suggests that they stay there until tomorrow when he will guide them to the village. The American woman will have none of this and takes off into the dark forest with her taxi driver. Of course the Bog Man kills her (very satisfying, that bit) but we only hear her screams.



One by one the group is picked off until only Hunter, the Professor and his assistant are left. They will now have to fight their way out to the village against a Bog Man who is bigger, stronger and out for revenge.

There are the makings of a good film in this plot and the producer did what he could with his budget, but there just isn't enough terror in it. The "bog" could be any forest anywhere and the Bog Man looks more like Tor Johnson from the old Ed Wood movies – just a huge man wearing a bit of old sacking that is in a remarkable state of preservation after three thousand years in a bog.

At least the Bog Man gets the best comedy bit when he comes across a pair of yapping poodles. In the next scene he now has a pair of fluffy black boots. There was a lot of time wasted as each character reveals a dark secret in their lives that suggests they may have a certain connection to the bogs themselves. As an attempt at improving the characterisation it just didn't work. Without the interesting plot subject and Vinnie Jones' role I don't think this film would have worked. Even with its defects though, it is quite good entertainment. Now, if someone was to give the producer and director a lot more money and tell them to go off and do it again properly …..



The Loved Ones
Horror drama
Australia
Madman
R4 DVD



First there was Mad Max, widely criticised for its over-the-top violence. Recently there was Wolf Creek, which was closer to torture porn than horror. Last year we reviewed revenge movie The Horseman, another Australian film with a high violence content. Now we have The Loved Ones from first-time director / writer Sean Byrne. The film is just as over the top as Mad Max and more violent than The Horseman, so what does it have to offer that we haven't already seen?

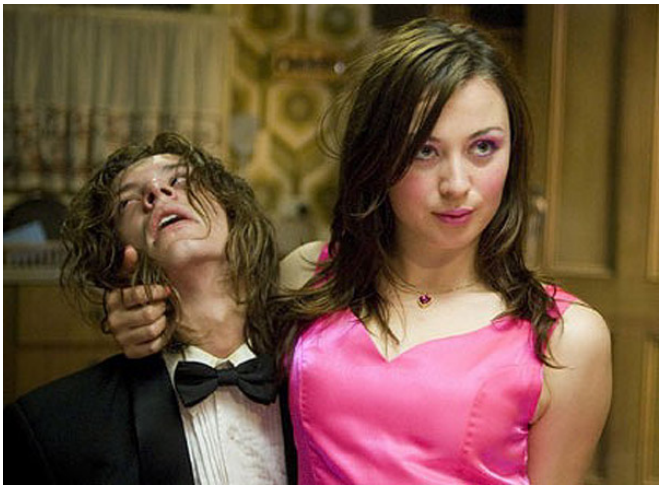
For a start it deals with mental illnesses in a way that isn't derogatory. There is a knife-wielding murderess, sure, but we can see where her illness is coming from. Secondly the characters are three dimensional and therefore more realistic. Most horror writers seem to prefer gore over character. Thirdly, and my daughter insisted on this, it has heartthrob Xavier Samuels in it. OK, he doesn't turn me on but I admire his acting skills – even in this film where he has little to do but sit there and groan.

Byrne has given us a film that is really assembled from bits of many other horror films but he has integrated them into a sensible, believable plot. That it IS believable is mostly due to the superb Australian actors and actresses filling out their parts and not just standing there and screaming a lot.



Lola (Robyn McLeavy) is a deeply disturbed girl. Normally quiet and withdrawn at school (and slightly menacing), she has plucked up the courage to ask Brent (Xavier Samuels) to partner her to the school dance. Brent has declined. He is going with his girlfriend Holly. We learn that Brent is afraid to drive following an accident where he crashed the family car. His father was killed and his mother seems to be deep in depression. Brent himself has episodes where he will disappear for days, and he still has the scars from his efforts at self-mutilation. Holly is gradually dragging him back into the real world.

Lola is unhappy at his rejection, to put it mildly. Her doting father kidnaps Brent, knocks him unconscious, and ties him to a chair in their farmhouse kitchen. He has decorated the kitchen as if for the school dance, but this dance will be purely for Lola and Brent. There is a strong suggestion of incest between Lola and "Daddy". Lola now sets about torturing Brent for rejecting her. First is an injection of drain cleaner that destroys Brent's voice. The torture is cruel and graphic. Brent manages to escape but is recaptured and finishes up in a basement where







Lola's other victims are kept like animals. Before he was pushed into the basement he managed to kill Daddy with jamming a knife into his throat.

Meanwhile Holly and Brent's mother are frantic with worry. The local policeman knows Brent's habit of disappearing for a while and although concerned, all he can do is get Search and Rescue ready to look for Brent the next morning.

There is a minor and largely irrelevant subplot involving Brent's best friend, the school drug dealer, and Mia, another disturbed girl who is the policeman's daughter.

Mia seems to be showing a reaction to rejection at school with her Goth look and brief, tarty clothing. This subplot seems to be included largely as a comic relief tension-easer, and by now that's what the story needs.





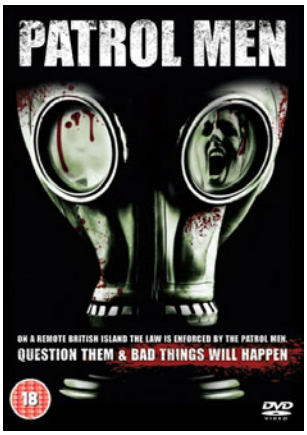
Finally Holly remembers Brent rejecting Lola and she wonders if Lola may have something to do with the disappearance. The policeman checks the house and finds Brent's and Daddy's blood everywhere, but Lola kills him as well. Brent finally escapes from the cellar. Lola has now lost it completely and has told Brent she is going into town to kill his mother as payback for him killing her Daddy. There is only one way to beat her into town – Brent must overcome his fears of driving and take the police car. The final scene is worthy of Mad Max.

To say I liked this film is an understatement. Regardless of the derivative plot it has a freshness due to the few "normal" people involved and the perfectly ordinary quiet country town in which it is set. Byrne doesn't fall for the overdone lonely cabin in the woods with something lurking out there. He hints at it with the lonely farmhouse, but that's as far as he goes. An unusual feature is the use of a female lead character. This probably wouldn't work in average films of this genre but Robyn McLeavy seems made for the part. She doesn't appear so much evil as seriously psychopathic. I could even feel some sympathy for Lola.

I was surprised to find that the film was showing on the movie circuit – I would have thought that the blood and torture would have been enough to make it a "straight to DVD" product. I think it's the character development that lifts it out of that category. Don't miss this one.



Patrol Men
Crabtree Films
R2 DVD



Patrol Men is another top quality British product from their ever-increasing range of successful low-budget filmmakers. It may be a little rough around the edges but this does not detract from what is a well-made and rather worrying film.

On a small island off the British coast a local millionaire, Mayor Yorke, who is obsessed with the moral decay on the mainland, has set up his own small fiefdom with around 5000 like-minded people. These people were all prepared to give up their freedom for stability and a world of Old Fashioned Values according to Yorke's definitions. They are kept in line with tales of a possibly mythical bogeyman, Marcus Day, who murdered a group of people and apparently is still alive and loose on the island today. Any disappearances are blamed on Day. To "protect" the villagers Yorke has set an evening curfew. To enforce the curfew and his other edicts he has also set up the Patrol Men, a group of anonymous men who wear gas masks to hide their identities while doing Yorke's dirty work.

And Yorke has dirty work to be done. Although the villagers are generally docile it is the young generation that is becoming troublesome. Some have accepted the same values as their parents but others are questioning their suppression. Why the curfew? Does Marcus Day really exist? Why does the island have lots of Patrol Men but not a single policeman? Why are they discouraged at every step from leaving the island, even to attend University? Even though the island is isolated there is still some necessary contact with the outside world like school inspectors and the occasional immigrant. These outsiders cannot be controlled by Yorke so they are treated with suspicion. It is becoming obvious to all but the senior villagers that he is more than a little insane but his charismatic persuasive personality has so far kept the parents in line. They are in turn expected to keep their kids in line.
Local schoolgirl Alex is one who thinks the island needs a change. She simply wants to find out the truth of the Marcus Day myth, if that's what it is. Such awkward questions cannot be tolerated. She is helped by her friend Jess (he wears a leather jacket and likes rock music so is obviously a rebel). Having attracted Yorke's attention Alex and Jess are marked down for a visit by the Patrol Men. Her father is persuaded by Yorke's threats to have Alex blamed for a death caused by one of the Patrol Men. He can't do much about it.



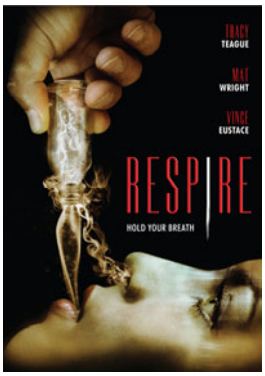
The new teacher on the island is also becoming suspicious and the School Inspector may be more than he appears to be. Yorke's little empire is starting to feel the pressure and he retaliates the only way he knows – he sets the Patrol Men onto any dissenter. There is only one way he can be stopped but many will have to give their lives to regain their freedom. In the end, will it work? Can the old people even handle freedom any more?

The plot is a nice if chilling turn on the old "conflict of the generations" story mixed with a generous helping of "absolute power corrupts absolutely".

In spite of the low budget the film still has a professional look to it. A little more time and money would have gone a long way to explaining some of the gaps in the plot. Writer / directors David Campion and Ben Simpson have taken a very ordinary background and imposed a "what if….?" scenario on it. It works really well. This is the sort of film that should lead them to bigger things.



Respire
Horror / Thriller
MTI Video
R1 DVD



The Romans had an old belief that a person's soul left their body with their last dying breath. Anyone who inhaled that breath would have diseases cured and have extended life.

Before the Second World War Doctor Kaminsky was experimenting with this and has had partial success. With the Germans invading, though, he was killed before the work was completed. His vials of dying breath and the details of his process were stored in a decorative wooden box which made its way through a succession of owners. Along the way the key to the box was lost. It is currently in the hands of Susan, an antiques dealer, and she has advertised the box on an Internet auction. She is surprised when a young man, Raif, offers her a huge amount for the box and gives her a partial explanation. Curious, she withdraws the box from sale but it is too late. At another auction Susan buys a book once owned by Kaminski. She has an opposing bidder and the price is forced up to astronomic levels. Hidden in the book is the key to the box.

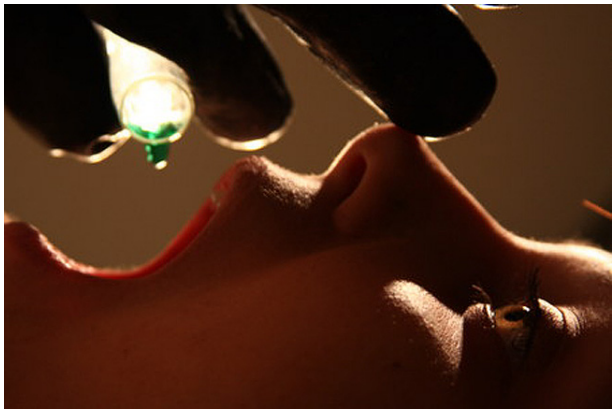
Susan is suffering from terminal cancer. Out of curiosity she opens one of the vials to see what is in it, and smells it. The trapped breath inside enters her body and cures her cancer. There is a side effect that nobody seems to have been aware of.

As well as repairing her body, the breath has transferred the memories and soul of the departed. She now finds she has Kaminsky's memories in her mind as well.



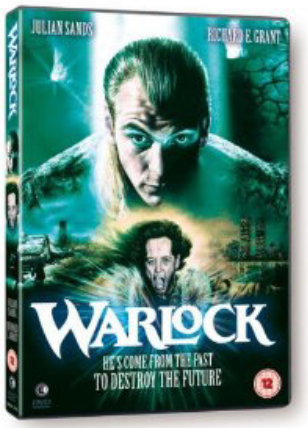
Now she has the box and the book she is targeted by both men. Raif gives her more information on Kaminsky's experiments but the other man, Alex, seems more menacing. One thing none of them knew was that Kaminsky used prisoners due for execution to collect the dying breaths from, and anyone who breathes from those vials will inherit the prisoners' vicious psychoses and behaviour.

There are some holes in the plot but overall it is a tense, gripping story. Tracy Teague plays Susan with strength, which is important as the whole plot revolves around her. Although it is a low budget indie film the quality cinematography lifts it well above normal for this style of film.





Warlock
Second Sight Films
R2 DVD



This film was first released in 1998 and has been one of the inspirations for many similar films of this genre. The original honour probably goes to Highlander, released some three years earlier.

The plot has become familiar to fans of this style of film. Ancient witch / warlock / evil person is about to die then is transported to the present where he / she / it must recover a lost talisman / book / artifact that, in their hands, will destroy humanity. Another will also be transported, and must thwart the evil plan and Save Humanity. Due to a dodgy trans-time transport system they will appear a long way apart in a large city and will often try to enlist local help for their cause. They will find each other and fight it out and it will all end in tears.

In this case it's a warlock (well played by Julian Sands in a truly menacing manner). He must retrieve an ancient grimoire (a book of spells). The not-very-bright priests of those days broke the book into three pieces so it could be found later by an Evil One.

A young witch hunter, Redferne (Richard E





Grant, dressed like a roadkill sheep) hates the warlock for killing his wife. With some help from a rather airheaded woman (Lori Singer) he tracks down the warlock and the fight begins. The woman is cursed by the warlock with a spell that will age her twenty years every day. She now has about three days to live.

The film is fast-moving and has the appropriate comic touches as the witch hunter, under the woman's guidance, learns the ways of the 20th century. The makeup artists did a magnificent job showing Lori Singer aging each day – it's not over the top, but quite believable. There are enough well done effects that the film will hopefully avoid the ravages of another remake. These days "remake" seems to mean "add more effects". This film it is so well done already that a remake would add nothing.

Despite its plot seeming fairly conventional today, I quite enjoyed the film.

It is well made, entertaining and just a little spectacular in places. Worth watching.



The Chasing World
Science Fiction
Eastern Eye
Madman
R4 DVD



Japanese with English subtitles.

Much as I like them, it is good to see Japan branching away from Anime and mecha stories and getting back into more thoughtful SF. The Chasing World is a great example of what they can do without loads of special effects and animations, and U.S. directors could take notice. Director Issei Shabata gives us a budget film shorn of nearly all special effects, one that depends on an interesting plot and good acting.

The story is the conventional good – versus - evil, but with a twist. Young Tsubasa Sato's mother has disappeared and his father is a drunk. His sister Ai is almost catatonic in a mental home, where she is being molested by a doctor.

Tsubasa is a runner. He runs to get himself out of trouble with bullies and criminals, and he is very good at it – he even seems to enjoy it.





One day, a strange coincidence happens. Many people named Sato are dying in strange accidents. This seems not to be connected to Tsubasa even though he is a Sato – it is a common enough name, after all. One day, however, he is too slow to get away and looks to be in for a beating from a gang led by his old best friend Hiroshi Sato. Hiroshi has formed his own gang and now there is no place in his life for friendship with Tsubasa.

Before the gang can beat up Tsubasa he disappears, then regains consciousness in what appears to be the same park. Everything is subtly different. There is a huge, ominous-looking building on the skyline.

A little confused and puzzled, he runs across two of his friends. They are obviously gay – not the friends he knew. They recognise him, though, but seem as confused as he is at his reappearance. Then he runs across his ex-





friend Hiroshi and Hiroshi seems as friendly as ever – no punk hairdo, no gang. They are in the park trying to work things out when Tsubasa is approached by a girl who is the image of his sister. Her name is also Ai.

Ai explains that he is in a parallel world. Everyone has a double on the other world and their lives are interlinked. If one dies, so does his / her double on the other world. Tsubasa's sister is catatonic because of the mental pressure of keeping the two realities linked. For this new world has a problem – it has a King who hates the name Sato. They are currently in the middle of a Death Race. Any Sato's will be hunted down by the King's strange killers, called simply "Its", and taken to the palace where they will be executed on TV at the end of the day. It is these executions that has caused the Sato deaths back on Tsubasa's home world.



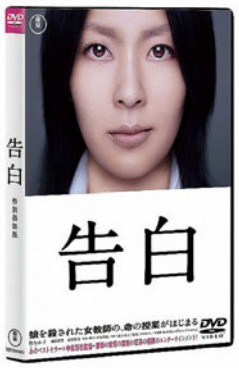


Tsubasa joins the others for mutual protection, as there are still two days of the Death Race to go. If the Ai on this planet dies, so does his sister back on the other planet. He can kill the King if he can find out who he is, by going back to his world and killing him there. But who is he? Finding out and correcting the problem will take all of his skills as a runner to stay ahead of the Its. Fortunately his sisters, one on each planet, are watching over him. The end is a little unexpected, but if there is one parallel earth why can't there be more?

This film looks like the Japanese equivalent of the U.S. and British indie films. All are made on a small or microscopic budget with minimal effects, just good production values and superb acting. They don't need extended swearing or blood and gore to make a good film. Well done, Mr Shabata.



Confessions
CN Entertainment
R3 DVD



Japanese with English subtitles

Confessions is one of the most disturbing films I have ever watched, from any country. It is a story of peer pressure, carefully planned revenge and dark secrets, and it constantly raises the question – how could this happen?

Popular teacher Yuko Moriguchi announces to her rowdy but otherwise normal middle school class that she is leaving the teaching profession. She reminds the children in what appears to be a pep talk that since they are under age they cannot be charged with a crime. They must act with responsibility throughout their lives. Then she drops the bombshell. She is giving up because of the death of her little daughter, who was found dead in the school swimming pool.

She reveals that her daughter did not die accidentally but was murdered and the murderers are in this class. She knows who they are but can't do anything about them. She has laced their last lot of school milk with AIDS-infected blood. The students react with horror. The two murderers give themselves away by their reactions.

Schoolkids, being easily led, turn on the class bully as the most likely murderer. They are right but the way they persecute him is cruel in the extreme. Why did he do it? In a monologue confession he gives his reasons and we see that his childhood has not been easy. There is one thing he wants more than anything – his mother's respect. His henchman in the murder is a weak, easily led student. In his confession he admits he feels he is a nobody, and he thought that his association with the bully may get him the respect he craves.

One girl does not join in the punishment and she is herself persecuted by the students, who are now becoming vicious. The mob mentality has taken over. Even she has a secret, though.

One of the boys is driven to madness by the pressure. His descent is not helped by an over-protective mother who will blame any one else but has not noticed his problems herself.

The boys are being mercilessly punished more severely than the police could do. If Yuko had planned it she couldn't have done it better. Or did she plan it this way? Who would know better how children would react than a schoolteacher? Who would know the best way to manipulate them?

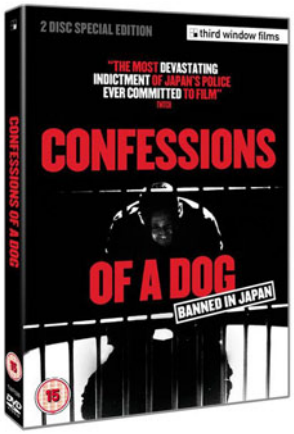
Even the parents are not immune to the mounting pressure and many have their own secrets. One by one, through their confessions, we see the results of the murder as it spreads through the school and parents. The end is revealing and explosive.

Director and writer Tetsuya Nakashima appears to know the minds of children very well. They can be easily manipulated and the pack mentality can make them savage to anyone they see as an enemy. He brings this out powerfully in the film but he also brings out the individual reasons for each one behaving as they do. It's not a nice film but it is compelling.





Confessions of a Dog
Third Window Films
R2 DVD



Japanese with English subtitles

"In Japan there are two things you shouldn't question: the emperor and the police,". So says Takeda, a policemen who has risen high in the police hierarchy by joining in the atmosphere of bribes, favours and illegal practices.

With police forces around the world becoming extensively involved in the very crimes they are supposed to be preventing, there is no reason that Japan should be any different. Director Gen Takahashi has based this huge film (more than three hours) on the experiences of his friend investigative journalist Yu Terasawa. For years the traditional Japanese film has glorified concepts like honour and loyalty, even if they involve some of the nastiest gangsters. Takahashi's film, if true, reveals the truth – of Japan's 270,000 police many are corrupt.

The Japanese for policeman, "pochi", is very close to the English "pooch". The senior police therefore refer to their underlings as "dogs". In turn these men regard the newspaper reporters as dogs.

Giving them statements and handouts is called





by one officer "feeding the dogs". The Press has adapted to these arrangements and, as in the quote above, it is not going to question the police too closely.

We see the corruption in action at Takeda's first posting, a small police station where the police have a minor but significant crime gang of their own. Their actions may be as minor as "questioning" an attractive girl to get her name and address, and progress to rape for more major offences. When things are quiet they fall back on the "stolen bike" trick to rip off drunken businessmen.

The officer in charge is on drugs supplied to him by a corrupt Police captain. Takeda is noticed by the Captain and transferred to the Detectives. Here he experiences the full range of crimes committed by his superiors, but what can he do? He joins them.

Five years later he has risen in the ranks. As well as corruption he is now cheating on his





wife and generally enjoying the lavish lifestyle that corruption can bring. One thing is clear, though. The Police Commissioner can never be associated with corruption.

From time to time it will be necessary to sacrifice a cop, who is expected to show due loyalty and meekly accept his fate. He will be looked after when he comes out. The Commissioner is involved with the drug deals, gun smuggling and organised crime.

Takeda tries to disengage himself from the corruption by talking to a journalist but the man's editor will not take on the powerful police. Finally the journalist takes his story to the international press and the cat is out of the bag. The Commissioner decides that it is time for Takeda to be sacrificed as a corrupt cop.





Takeda does not want to go willingly. The police provide him with a tame attorney and arrange with the judge that Takeda's testimony will not be heard publicly. The courtroom audience is stacked with police and administrative staff and the photographers are evicted. Takeda is now willing to reveal all and confess his part in it, but no one is listening. He attempts suicide.

It was some years before Takahashi's film was released in Japan. Theatres didn't want to touch something that reflected badly on two great institutions, the Press and the police.

Even now it is not well known there. Yet film is a powerful way to bring out the abuses of the system and should lead to the question "Is this true? If so, what will we do about it?" The Japanese people do not seem to have gone that far. They accept that all is well with their police. Perhaps they, also, have reached the status of tame dogs.



Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame
Pinnacle Films
DVD and Blu-Ray
R4 DVD



Chinese with English subtitles

Apparently Detective Dee is a famous Chinese historical character whose previous appearances have been limited to comic books and anime. Director Tsui Hark has now brought him to the big screen in this action-and-spectacle film.

It is set in the sixth century AD. The would-be Empress Wu's husband has died and she intends to usurp the throne over her son. She would be China's first woman Emperor. There is much opposition to this among the nobility. Empress Wu has ordered a huge statue built in her honour. Work on it must be finished before her coronation. Or else. The trouble is that some of the leading men involved are spontaneously combusting. Is this a plot against the Empress, or some sort of revenge by the Gods? When Pei, her top investigator, can make no headway in the investigation, she has only one option left.

Eight years earlier she had imprisoned one of her police officials, Di Renjie (known as Detective Dee). He had mistakenly expressed anti-Empress sentiments when the Emperor died





and suggested that the Empress may have had something to do with the death. He was accused of plotting revolt against her. Now officially rehabilitated, Dee must find out the cause of the combustions. He is given the help of Pei and the Empress's favourite guard, a girl named Wan'er.

Dee's underground contacts point him to the unfortunately named Donkey Wang, who tells him of a rare beetle called a Fire Turtle. The beetle's venom can enter the body through a sting, or it can be dissolved in water. The official who combusted inside the statue was drinking copiously because of the heat and only caught fire when he went out into the sunlight. The beetles were thought to be extinct but it appears someone is breeding them.

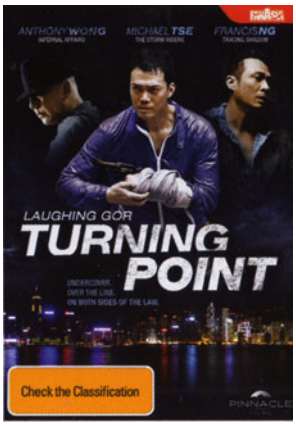
As Dee and his offsiders fight their way through the investigation it becomes obvious that there is a deeper plot as well. The Empress trusts nobody and has planted spies everywhere. She has good reason for her suspicions. It all comes to a head inside the huge statue where there is as much Indiana Jones-style action as you could want. The outcome will decide the position of the Empress as well as the future of China, for if she dies China will plunge once again into civil war.

The film is much what we have come to expect from Chinese films. There is lots of swordplay, talking homicidal deer, lovely scenery and sets and beautiful costuming, not to forget some of the silliest hats ever seen. The effects are spectacular and give the film a far bigger look than its budget would indicate. This one is a great piece of entertainment.





Turning Point
Hong Kong
Pinnacle Films
R4 DVD



Chinese with English subtitles

Laughing, a young man whose Triad boss has given him the odd nickname, is deep in trouble. Although a member of the Triad run by Number One he has been ordered to join the Police Force and work undercover for the Triad. In turn the Police have assigned Laughing to penetrate the Triads and inform on them. For secrecy, only Officer Xian knows of Laughing's double life. Number One knows the details as well – in his youth he was also a double agent working for the Triads. Now Officer Xian is in a coma in hospital and the police, not knowing the circumstances, are out to get Laughing and the other Triad members.

To complicate things Laughing's girlfriend is the sister of another Triad leader, the vicious Zatoi.

The Triad members believe Laughing could be a spy - too many of their operations are being intercepted by the Police. Finally Zatoi declares that Laughing must die.

Laughing is now being hunted by the Triads as well as the Police. Number One wants to find him and get him out of Hong Kong to some place safer, but Laughing won't go without his girlfriend Karen. Other members of Number One's Triad are sure he is the informer and will kill him on sight. Zatoi wants him dead as an informer and as his sister's boyfriend. The Police want him dead because when he escaped from custody an officer was killed.

Now Laughing has to decide where his loyalties really lie.

Turning Point is a violent film but the violence is an important part of the plot, not just gratuitous. The Chinese are producing some excellent cops 'n robbers films with good actors and plots and less obsession with special effects. Apart from the dodgy translation in the subtitles this film is a first class example of the genre.





Vanquisher
Madman
R4 DVD



Thai with English overdubs and subtitles.

Thailand is not a country known for its film industry so this one was a surprise. For sheer action it's as good as anything from Japan or the U.S. Its only drawback is a rather confused plot that is hard to follow with its multiple threads, doublecrossing characters and a strange mixture of terrorists, cops and ninjas.



Attractive new actress Sophita Sriban stars as a Thai police officer code named Gunja, seconded to the CIA Vanquisher project whose mission is to hunt Al Qaeda terrorists. When they invade a remote island looking for a terrorist leader she is the only survivor – almost. The team leader, Claire, has been told to leave no witnesses behind. They are, after all, invading a friendly foreign country. Puzzled but unable to share her concerns with other officers because of the secrecy required, Gunja returns to her work in the Special Operations squad of the Thai police.

The police are having their own problems with a Moslem terrorism group. They are hunting an extremist who is going to plant a large bomb in Bangkok. If it goes off it will kill thousands.

There follows a desperate hunt for the terrorists and their supporters. During the hunt they find the U.S. Vice President's computer has been hacked and they have details of CIA agents. The terrorists have also enlisted the help of a group of ninjas as an execution squad. Gunja is horrified to learn that Claire is also running another Vanquisher project in Thailand, and Gunja herself is marked for death.

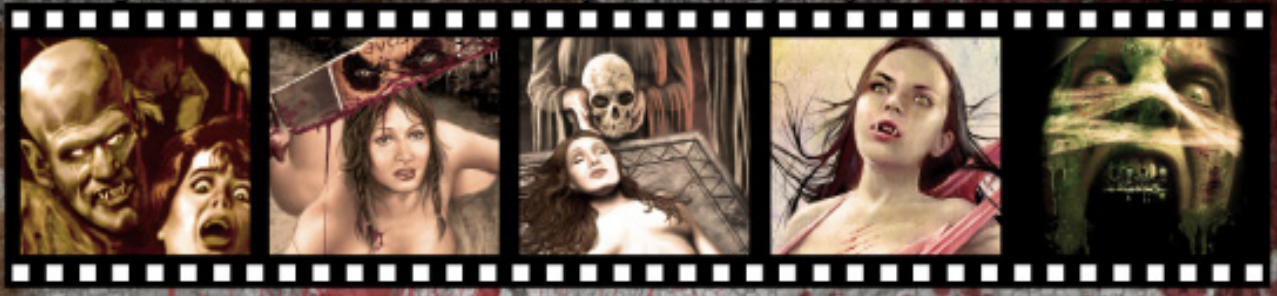
I don't know what else you could put into this film. It has gunfights, martial arts and betrayals. There is much running around leaping from building to building. Gunja spends a lot of time posing with a gun, but I confess I didn't mind these bits at all. The whole film seems to be made with skill and enthusiasm and is well worth watching.





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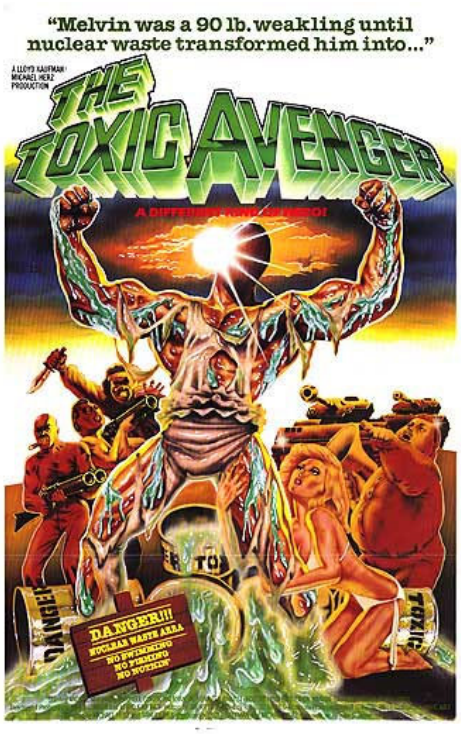
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